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## *Sister Jean Picks The Winners*

Most Las Vegas gamblers would give their diamond pinkie rings to have the kind of handicapping success a Chicago lady named Jean Kenny has enjoyed over the past several years.

—Super Bowl XXVIII: She predicted Dallas would win by 17. They won by 17.

—Super Bowl XXIX: She predicted San Francisco would win by 20. They won by 23.

—Super Bowl XXX: She predicted Dallas would win by 14. They won by 10.

—Super Bowl XXXIV: She predicted Tennessee would shock Jacksonville and meet St. Louis in the title game, where the Rams would triumph by seven. Which they did.

—Super Bowl XXXV: She predicted (on “The Tonight Show With Jay Leno”) Baltimore would thump the New York Giants. Cha-ching!

In 1994, as a panelist on WGN radio’s “The Prediction Show,” she compiled a 10-6 record, beating the host, Hub Arkush, and trouncing *USA Today*’s odds expert, Danny Sheridan.

Jean Kenny, 46, credits her penchant for pigskin prognostication to good old-fashioned Christian virtues: hours of exhaustive research, concentrated mathematical analysis, and meticulous attention to details. She's got the kind of work ethic that is supposed to pave the stairway to heaven. During the season she reads *Pro Football Weekly*, a statistics-heavy periodical favored by wiseguy bettors, and the sports sections of the local *Chicago Tribune* and *Chicago Sun-Times*. She does her homework.

"I study the injury situation," Kenny says, showing me a six-inch-thick file of newspaper clippings. "I follow the key performers and track how they did in previous games. I keep a separate file on special teams [punt-return squads, for example]. And I especially like good defensive teams. I guess you could say I pay close attention to the NFL."

Actually, you might say Jean Kenny follows the NFL religiously. In addition to being a rabid Chicago Bears fan, an expert handicapper, and a trusted leader among the sports-betting crowd, Jean Kenny has been, for the past 29 years, a certified S.P.

As in, Sister of Providence.

As in, nun.

She teaches religion and drug education/prevention at Archbishop Weber High School in northwest Chicago, lives at the Immaculate Conception convent, and studies the Holy Scriptures for an hour every night.

Only when she's done with those solemn duties does Sister Jean Kenny study the stat sheets. She even writes poetry extolling the virtues of her beloved home team, Da Bears. Such as this little free verse paean: *And on the eighth day God said: "Let there be football!" / And God created a classic team – the Chicago Bears.*

She is a most unusual individual, the kind of singular person most of us don't bump into very often: a lifelong nun who really, *really*, understands football.

The Sister Jean Kenny phenomenon is peculiar, but

not entirely incredible, if you take into account the geographical influence: namely, that she is from Chicago. This is a town that takes its sports seriously – far too seriously. (I was born there; I’m allowed to say this.) Fans in Chicago are knowledgeable, passionate, and rabidly devoted to their beloved Bulls-Hawks-Sox-Cubs-Bears. These are fans who throw back opposing-team home runs at Wrigley Field. This is a city where every third billboard attempts to make a product tie-in with the Bulls’ string of World Championships. This is a society of sports lovers who did not take “Saturday Night Live’s” lampooning of Mike Ditka well, penning numerous letters of complaint to the NBC television network. This is where Michael Jordan lives.

Sister Jean Kenny is the unlikely end product of a Chicago culture that breeds sports fanatics – whether they’re stockbrokers, truck drivers, or Sisters of Providence.

Her journey into the world of odds and pointspreads and over-unders began in 1985, when she won a William “The Refrigerator” Perry poetry contest sponsored by a local radio station. She had always followed sports as a child, playing varsity basketball and coaching tennis when she got older, but going to a Bears game, watching The Fridge rumble into the end zone – well, that gave her the kind of visceral thrill nuns usually derive from a particularly enlightening Bible passage. (“A good game is like watching poetry in motion,” she says.) “Monday Night Football” thought their nationwide viewership might be amused by a Catholic nun’s adoration of a 320-pound ball-carrying lineman and ran a segment about her during the 1986 playoffs. Shortly thereafter, Bears management invited Sister Jean to attend a few Bears games, where she got to meet Chicago’s craven idol, Mike Ditka, he of the slicked-back hair, pugnacious jaw, and easily parodied motivational speaking style. Reporters started calling Sister Jean to ask her opinion of upcoming foot-

ball games; her predictions, it seemed, were often eerily accurate, as if touched by divine inspiration.

A spiritual leader, if you will, was born.

In addition to her regular Thursday-evening gig on "The Prediction Show," Sister Jean has appeared on KABC in Los Angeles, CNN, and "Late Night with Conan O'Brien." This year she premiered a new radio program, "NFL for Women," during morning drive-time. People pay attention to what she has to say.

"My motive is strictly fun," she insists, sitting in the living room of her Chicago convent home. "It's like a hobby, that's all. I don't personally bet on the games. Otherwise, something I do for fun would be like a Las Vegas carnival. You've got to draw the line."

The nice — and mildly surprising — thing about Sister Jean, is her merciful, even forgiving, attitude toward those who would sin. "If people want to bet on football games, fine," she says, shrugging. "I don't want to get into a big moral thing. If my listeners choose to bet, that's their business. If you take my advice and you're lucky, I'm happy. If not, I don't want to hear about it."

Sister Jean believes those who follow her advice will fulfill this quotation from John 16:22. "Your heart will rejoice with a joy no one can take from you." And if not, hey, she only does this for fun.

Sister Jean has received more than a few notes and calls from what she describes as "faithful" listeners who have profited from her advice. "Oh, I get calls all the time. 'I won twenty bucks because of you.' Or, 'Thank you for your advice. You really helped me win big.' Of course, I'm not so sure these people are going to be so happy if I make a big mistake. I try to tell people that betting on football games is a big risk."

She tells her fourteen-year-old students the same thing: She does a lot of study, she works hard on her handicapping, and she can strongly *recommend* certain picks. But ethics and responsibilities to a higher calling

preclude her from plunking down the collection money on the Cowboys-Dolphins game.

"The fact that I'm pretty good at what I do gives me credibility," she says, nodding. "The kids really open up to me. They think I'm cool."

I can't help wondering, has Sister Jean ever considered establishing a "900"-line, like so many other "professional" touts? The profits could go to her diocese or some other worthy charity. She could advertise in the sports section of the *Trib*: "Sister Jean's Football Picks. There's Nun Better!"

"Oh, heavens no," she laughs. "I wouldn't do something like that even if I was allowed, which I'm not. I don't think it's right. And besides," she says, smiling, "if predicting football games ever became more than my hobby, it would stop being fun."

In lieu of monetary rewards, Sister Jean Kenny's handicapping prowess has earned her a scrapbook full of celebrity mementos, such as personal notes from Conan and his former sidekick Andy Richter, arm-in-arm photos with Bears star Chris Zorich, and her most prized picture: a shot of her with The Pope of Chicago Sports, The Man himself. Ditka.

"I'm very fond of him," Sister Jean says reverentially. "He's very feisty, but very likeable. And he knows his football. I think Mike Ditka is great. Of course, I generally like disciplinarians."

Meeting him was, she admits, the second biggest thrill of her life. "The first was Mother Teresa. That was the greatest moment of my life. But Ditka was a close second."

## *Getting Paid and Telling Lies: The Offshore Sports Book Industry*

Nearly five years ago, back in the rosy days when I was an innocent lad uninitiated into the exquisitely dirty world of offshore sports gambling, I wrote about the then-nascent industry from the perspective of an outsider, a curious observer trying to make sense of a new wrinkle in the gambling tablecloth. Today I'm a wee bit wiser.

I didn't realize then that I was witnessing the inception of a milieu as unashamedly Machiavellian as any serious campaign for United States political office.

Back then I watched; now I play. Back then I was enthusiastic; now I'm skeptical. Back then I was blind; now, as the song goes, I can see.

And it ain't a pretty sight.

My original take on the world of offshore wagering, written in the mid-nineties, went like this:

It's as easy as buying a fruit basket.

You pick up the phone, dial a toll-free number<sup>1</sup> that

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<sup>1</sup> Now, most offshore bookies can be reached instantly through the Internet as well.

connects you to an office in a faraway land, give the nice man on the other end your account information, and place your order. If you're lucky, a few days later your "merchandise" arrives in your mailbox. Only it's not strawberries and melons, but a certified bank check.

Welcome to the latest development in the world of sports gambling: offshore bookies.

While a sports-bettor's options were once confined to either the legal services offered in Nevada or the local but illegal bookmaker, gamblers can now bet quasi-legally by telephone with an internationally based operation. I say quasi-legally because it's a crime in most states for residents to make a bet on sports over the phone; on the other hand, the bookmakers operating out of locations as far flung as Australia and Antigua are fully sanctioned by their respective local governments.

According to Professor I. Nelson Rose from Whittier (California) Law School, a leading authority on gambling and the law, "The Interstate Wire Act makes it a crime for anyone in the business of gambling to use a telephone line that crosses a state or national boundary to transmit information assisting in the placing of bets. Note that the law applies only one way: It is not a federal crime for a player to make a bet by phone." In other words, it's the bookies who are breaking federal law. Some states, such as California, have passed even stricter laws, which prohibit accepting or making an illegal wager. Most experts agree, though, that law-enforcement officials are generally uninterested in busting bettors; they're focused on putting the bookies out of business.

As Rose notes, "True players — guys who aren't bookies — never get arrested for making a bet." A seasoned sports bettor who prefers to remain anonymous says, "Unless you're a monster bettor, the feds aren't going to bother you."

Establishing an account overseas is simple. After fill-



ing out an application verifying age and identity<sup>2</sup>, gamblers deposit U.S. funds in the bookmaker's bank, either via wire transfer or cashier's check; for a 3% surcharge (often waived), most places even take credit cards. After their account is activated, players are assigned a PIN number. Many operations also offer hundreds of dollars in incentives to new customers<sup>3</sup>.

To bet, customers call the bookie's toll-free number, identify themselves by code, announce their bet, and listen as the clerk calls the bet back. (All telephone calls are recorded for mutual security.) A \$50 minimum bet is required by most overseas operations. Maximums typically range from \$5,000 to \$20,000 per bet, similar to Nevada limits. If the player loses his bet, the money is deducted from his account. If he wins, the proceeds may either be reinvested in his account, like a dividend, or sent to America via overnight courier.

At present (remember, I was writing in 1995), off-shore bookies accessible to American gamblers operate in the Dominican Republic, Antigua and Barbuda, Aruba, Grenada, St. Vincent, Venezuela, Curacao, Mauritius, Australia, Belgium, Costa Rica, Panama, Belize, St. Kitts, and Gibraltar. It's difficult to estimate how many operations exist—certainly hundreds—or how much money they take in. One publicly traded company, Interactive Gaming and Communications, which operates Sports International Race and Sports Book in

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<sup>2</sup> A formality many operations no longer bother with.

<sup>3</sup> The industry standard is a 10% bonus on a player's initial deposit, credited as cash directly into his account. Some companies occasionally advertise bonuses as high as 30%-40%, but these too-good-to-be-true offers are often too good to be true. Several dozen notorious scammers, now out of business or operating under another name, used the "we'll give you the moon" come-on before absconding with all of their customers' cash.

Antigua and Grenada, reported gross wagers of nearly \$50 million in both 1994 and 1995<sup>4</sup>.

Michael "Roxy" Roxborough, the world's preeminent oddsmaker, whose company, Las Vegas Sports Consultants, supplies many of the offshore bookies with their betting lines, says, "It's hard to say how much money the offshore bookmakers are taking in altogether. Certainly more than all the sports books in Nevada, which handled \$2.5 billion in 1995. It's got to be a huge number. Anyone can pick up the telephone<sup>5</sup>."

Terry Cox, formerly the race and sports book manager at Harrah's Reno, as well as at an offshore operation in the Caribbean, says, "The growth of sports gambling is phenomenal, whether legal or illegal. Offshore bookies are taking advantage of that growth by providing a more formal, structured, reliable scenario than the typical illegal bookie."

Cash-hungry foreign governments that collect licensing fees and taxes from the sports books not only allow the books, but encourage them. Indeed, in October 1995, Antigua and Barbuda's minister of communication sent an open letter of invitation to bookmaking companies, saying that his government was "keen to develop its offshore market sector, particularly the offshore gaming sector" and that Antigua was "the perfect spot to relocate your sports betting company<sup>6</sup>."

Years before Antigua rolled out the welcome mat, Ronald Sacco, a mob bookie known as "The Cigar," took his business to the Dominican Republic. Trying to out-

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<sup>4</sup> They subsequently went out of business, leaving behind thousands of unpaid customers.

<sup>5</sup> Roxy has recently sold his interest in LVSC and no longer personally supplies opening numbers.

<sup>6</sup> Belize is the latest principality to court bookies, promising them government cooperation—not to mention cheap telecommunications prices.

run a series of felony convictions for bookmaking in the States, Sacco opened shop on the island of Hispaniola in the late 1980s, connecting to his old stable of clients via toll-free telephone lines. While the weather was hot, the pressure from law-enforcement officials was not. Sacco thought he'd found the perfect haven. But "The Cigar" was an old-time bookie who used old-fashioned methods for paying and collecting: a network of runners and clerks who made cash transfers back in America. (The new breed primarily relies on electronic or mail transactions, though some have so-called "agents" who recruit players and handle the collections and disbursements.) Sacco, apprehended on a return trip to the States, was convicted of money laundering in 1994.

But his cronies had seen the light—or at least a reflection of the light. A substantial number of operators with organized-crime ties (as well as prior convictions) transferred their businesses to the sunny Caribbean, where licensing fees cost as little as \$5,000 (they now go for closer to \$100,000) and background checks were nonexistent. They kept their wiseguy clientele and shadowy practices—no advertising, no publicity, no customer service—but took care not to make the same mistakes as Sacco.

While some offshore operations are still "mobbed up," in the past few years many international sports-betting shops have become more corporate. Run by former (legal) Nevada bookmakers and backed by venture capitalists and marketing wizards, these sports books advertise heavily in such mainstream outlets as airline in-flight magazines and issue quarterly earnings statements. Some are even publicly traded companies.

Which leads to an obvious question: Will the offshore bookies put the corner bookies out of business? Will they take a bite out of Nevada's legal sports-betting market?

"This is definitely the wave of the future," one major professional sports bettor tells me. "Everything is going

to depend on this new federal Gambling Commission” — which was set up to examine the ramifications of gambling and make recommendations — “and Congress and the Justice Department. If they all want to get involved, things could get messy. But if everything remains status quo — it’s like it might as well be legal. Why would anyone want to deal with some goon with a paper bag full of cash when he can do it so clean over the phone?”

The man who makes the odds doesn’t necessarily agree. “I don’t think the illegal corner bookies will disappear,” Roxy says. “The offshore bookies will hurt the illegal guys, but not put them out of business, because the illegal bookies still offer credit and they probably have lower minimums.” Roxy thinks the offshore operations will have even less impact on legal sports books. “The offshore operations definitely won’t affect Nevada, unless someone suddenly puts a hundred thousand hotel rooms in Antigua. Vegas sports betting is done mostly by tourists. The offshore bookie is going after a different customer.”

Indeed, Roxy thinks that rather than eroding the existing market in sports gambling, the offshore bookies are expanding it. “We’re seeing a whole new segment of sports gamblers,” Roxy says. “We’re seeing professionals, successful people who like the security and discretion of the offshore bookies, people who might not be comfortable dealing with a mob bookie. For these players, the kind of gambler who reads the Wall Street Journal, doing business with an offshore bookie is like calling their stockbroker.”

Since no money changes hands on U.S. soil, you have about as much chance of getting harassed for making an overseas sports bet as you do for smoking a Cuban cigar. This is why Scott Kaminsky, odds manager for Bowman International out of Mauritius, says his business can only get bigger<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> He’s now the main man at LVSC.

"I don't know a single person who has ever been charged with as much as a misdemeanor for betting. The American government won't say it's illegal to bet with an organization such as ours, so you can almost assume they're implying it's legal<sup>8</sup>."

Kaminsky, whose office employs up to 100 clerks during the heart of football season, says offshore bookies are serving an enormous market. "We're helping make a billion-dollar industry become legal. It seems like two new offshore shops open every week. This isn't necessarily gambling's future, but it's definitely the present."

Offshore bookies offer American sports bettors several appealing improvements over the mob-connected bookies operating out of corner bars, such as:

- **Accessibility.** With toll-free 800 or 888 numbers manned by dozens of clerks, it's often easier to get a bet down with your man in the Caribbean than it is to reach a customer-service representative at your long-distance company. According to one major Las Vegas gambler, a man who can make phone bets legally in his home state, but prefers to deal with the international bookies, "I'd rather bet with some of these offshore operations. They run their business like a business. They treat you like they want your action. Try calling a Las Vegas sports book—they'll put you on hold for ten minutes. They act like they're doing you a favor. The offshore guys are all about service."

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<sup>8</sup> As a gentleman named Jay Cohen can attest, the U.S. is becoming much more explicit in its displeasure with the burgeoning offshore gambling industry. Cohen, one of the founders of World Sports Exchange, a pioneering book in Antigua, was charged—and convicted—of violating the Wire Act. He is currently free on appeal. His case is viewed by many in the offshore gambling industry as both precedent-setting and foreshadowing with regard to either further legal travails or blissful freedom.

- ***Different odds.*** One of the keys to beating the bookies is getting a good “price,” or odds, on your bet. Smart sports bettors shop around, looking for the best deal. If Vinny is offering the Packers as seven-point favorites and Sid has them at six and a half, players who want to take the Packers will opt for the bookie offering the half-point discount. Gamblers who play with offshore bookies can get a dozen or more different quotes on the game of their choice, ideally finding a bargain price. “The offshore books don’t usually move their lines as quickly as the bookies in America,” one professional sports gambler says. “I’m not saying you can find numbers that are outrageous, but sometimes you can find a good value.”
- ***Large menu of bets.*** Ask your local bookie if he’ll take your action on a European rugby match. Or a South American soccer game. Or a Japanese golf tournament. Chances are he’ll offer action only on American football, baseball, and basketball, and the occasional fight. Offshore bookies, who cater to an international clientele, post numbers on just about anything, including elections. “The offshore bookies put up a lot of exotic bets, some strange propositions,” the professional sports gambler says. “I don’t know if they’re good values — probably not — but if you’re looking for unusual action, they’ll give it to you.”

Betting with offshore bookies can have its downside, particularly if you wager large sums. “I believe that ninety percent of these operations would be in trouble if every one of their clients asked for their money at the same time,” says Roxy Roxborough. “A lot of these start-up operations are living on the float. One bad football month,

four losing weeks in a row — and that can happen — you'll see a real shakeout."

There are other risks associated with offshore gambling. Among them are:

- *Getting stiffed.* While a telephone bettor has an assurance that his licensed offshore bookmaker won't be suddenly shut down by the government—as happens occasionally to illegal bookies—he is nevertheless faced with the very real possibility of getting ripped off. Most American bookies let their customers play on good-faith credit: You make your bet, then pay off or collect later. Offshore bookies, however, will let you bet only what you have on account. In other words, you've got to put up a lot of front money. Sending cash overseas to someone you've never seen — potentially a con man with bad intentions — clearly exposes you to fiduciary chicanery. "It's one thing to win a bet and not get paid," a serious sports bettor says. "To lose everything you put up, that's a catastrophe."
- *Odds.* Just as the variance in price quotes between your local bookie and a book offshore can work in your favor, it can also hurt you. "If you don't shop around, if you accept whatever odds an offshore bookmaker offers, you might be getting a bad price," Roxy Roxborough says. "On the other hand, if the odds are too good, you could be looking at a going-out-of-business sale."
- *Uncollectible debts.* Unless you're interested in flying to, say, Costa Rica to chase down a few hundred bucks, you'll have little recourse, legal or otherwise, to collect money owed to you. Whereas

you can see your local bookie (or one of his runners), with an offshore office you're merely dealing with a distant voice on a telephone. Do your research well, because once you're screwed by an international bookmaker, you'll probably never collect.

When selecting an offshore bookie, look for these three attributes: quick and efficient payment, competitive odds, and courteous service.

"The whole key to playing with an offshore bookie is buyer beware," Roxy says. "Do your research. How long have they been in business? Have friends and colleagues reported good experiences? What's their reputation? Do they even have a reputation? Of course, this is the same common-sense approach you would use buying a used car or a vacuum cleaner."

Except buying a used car or a vacuum cleaner was never this easy.

That was then.

In the spirit of *caveat emptor*, let me tell you about now.

Of the hundreds of sports books operating offshore — and there seem to be a few new ones opening every week — I can recommend only a handful. The industry is plagued with problems.

Those who would like to see gambling banned on the Internet decry the lack of regulation and oversight enjoyed by the offshore gambling industry. Anti-Internet-gambling proponents say that millions of vulnerable victims must be protected from charlatans and con-men hiding behind glowing monitors, waiting to fleece any innocent Web surfer with a credit card. The pro-Internet-gambling forces say that's nonsense, that the cyber-gambling joints are legitimate businesses with the capital investment and ethics of any other dot-com. The fact is, in



the case of the offshore sports book industry, the bookies are proving to be their own worst enemy. By failing to police themselves effectively, they are inviting federal intervention. And I'm not sure it won't be warranted.

Presently, because many of the bookies are operating illegally in the eyes of the United States government and legally in the eyes of whatever principality the bookmaker calls home, disgruntled gamblers still have little if any legal recourse when they have a dispute with the guys holding the money. If an offshore bookmaker refuses to pay his customer, in most cases all the book stands to lose is its reputation. Now, that's a big deal in the world of bookmaking, where "honor" is considered as vital a commodity as a big bankroll. But to a disgruntled player, none of that reputation stuff can replace his missing cash.

As Bill Haywood illustrates in his book *Beat Web-Casinos.com*, most offshore operators, whether Internet casinos or phone-in sports books, prefer to milk their cash-cow customers instead of slaughter them for meat. Therefore, outright larceny doesn't take place often. But when it does, the cow stays dead. The reality is, if an offshore bookie decides to steal a player's cash—for whatever reason—the player will have an awfully difficult time getting it back. Though there are relatively few outright thieves whose *raison d'être* is to steal whatever money foolish gamblers send to them, there are plenty of what I term "reluctant stiffes," guys who originally had no ill intent when they opened for business, but turned rotten under pressure. These are bookies who, either because of mismanagement or personal failings, discover at some point that they don't have the funds to pay all of their customers. Unlike in Vegas or other highly regulated casino environments, there's no official body that monitors the amount of cash these sports books have on hand. Jurisdictions such as Australia and Antigua are supposed to have government agencies overseeing their books—and fewer bad shops exist in

these places than, say, Costa Rica, which has no federal oversight—but even these countries don’t guarantee a player’s deposits. Sometimes when there’s a “run on the bank,” a wave of simultaneous withdrawal requests, the weaker operations simply don’t have the funds to cover their obligations. Too often, regrettably, some of them take the easy way out.

And because few jurisdictions conduct criminal background checks or demand promissory bonds, deadbeat bookies can simply open a new shop under a different name, in a different locale, and try again.

It should be noted that, perhaps surprisingly, it’s not always the little shops that are the most egregiously dishonorable. Often it’s the Very Big Operations, the industry’s VBOs, that are most dangerous. Some of the biggest and most heavily advertised books are in fact the worst places to play.

It’s also important to note that the targets of many non-payment, or ridiculously slow payment, cases involve winning (often professional) bettors. Many of the biggest offshore bookies, as well as most of the smaller ones, dislike so-called “sharp” customers, players who will either win in the long run or lose less than the average degenerate sports gambler. Like casinos that banish card counters, many of the largest offshore sports books despise winning players. They’d much rather have their phone lines and bandwidth occupied by losers, just as most casinos would like their blackjack tables filled with people who will split a pair of fives and always take insurance.

I am one of these winning players, a professional gambler connected to some of the best information in the world of sports betting. As such, much of what I relate here comes from personal experience. In addition to several years of active research, betting on thousands of games with hundreds of offshore bookies, I monitor several online message forums, where players share information about good and bad operations. Since anyone

can write virtually anything he wishes in an online chat room, I cannot vouch for the veracity of all the numerous complaints, cries of agony, and pleas for help that turn up regularly on Web sites dedicated to offshore sports betting. Some may be elaborate hoaxes or vicious lies. But not all of them. And based on my travails, as well as those of people I know well, I give credence to many of the horror stories circulating on the Internet about various offshore sports books.

Two years ago, a wealthy gambler from California, call him Mr. J, opened an account with one of the largest of the offshore books. This VBO is located in Costa Rica—one of those worrisome jurisdictions where, at present, the “license” a sports book needs is the same general business license granted to, say, a hot-dog vendor. Mr. J deposited \$200,000 with which to wager and, over the course of a nine-week period, managed to blow it all. The VBO called him at home and encouraged him to deposit more money, promising that he’d be granted higher limits so that he might have a chance to recoup his losses. Mr. J did just that and, thanks to some excellent advice, allegedly from one of the sharpest sports bettors in America, had two successive winning weeks. Big winning weeks. In fact, the Californian managed to churn his replenished bankroll into \$486,000. Now he wanted a payout.

Mr. J never got a penny of his winnings.

What he did get was a promise from the VBO’s CEO, a former New York and Miami street bookie, that he would never see his money again. Despite having lost for nine straight weeks, Mr. J, according to the VBO’s boss, was betting “steam” games [slang for “smart money”] on the advice of a famous bettor and poker player out of Las Vegas.

In late 2000, another gambler, this one a \$100 bettor, hit a long-shot six-team baseball parlay—the kind that comes in about once every two years—and won more

than \$30,000 from a heavily promoted VBO. For three months, the VBO tried to avoid paying, claiming variously that the gambler had exceeded his betting limits, that their software was faulty, that he had tried to “defraud” the company, ad nauseam. As of this writing, after months of dissembling and wriggling, the VBO has yet to pay the man. The story being circulated on the Internet message boards is that the gambler will be allowed to collect his winnings on the condition that he fly down to Costa Rica (at the book’s expense) and not talk to anyone about the “settlement.” This wouldn’t be such a scary proposition, if not for the fact that the CEO of this particular VBO has a penchant for surrounding himself with armed bodyguards.

I personally experienced the VBO mambo three years ago. Early one week, when the lines were first released, I made several large (for me) wagers on college football games being played on the coming Saturday. All of the games were on television, and I figured the “price” would go up later in the week, primarily since I was betting the favorites, which the mythical “public” seems to support almost every contest. My hypothesis proved correct. Thanks to an avalanche of money on the favorites, the odds did climb, from something like six points to seven or eight.

All three of my favorites won and covered the spread that weekend. And they would have returned a healthy profit. Unfortunately, I never got to cash my tickets—the VBO’s owner had unilaterally canceled my wagers the day before the game. He didn’t like that the line had moved so far in my favor.

Imagine as a bettor being able to cancel your wager when you find out two hours before game time that the star quarterback you were banking on has broken a bone in his throwing hand while conducting a drug deal with some indigent prostitutes. “Hi, Mr. Bookie, I’m pretty sure my team is going to lose now, so, if you don’t mind,

I'm going to just call off last Tuesday's bets."

When I discovered my bets had been canceled without my permission, I called down to find out how the VBO could justify such outrageous behavior. According to the CEO, the line moves I benefited from indicated I was obviously some sort of sharp bettor or connected to good information and, therefore, I might not actually lose the majority of my wagers. And that's not the kind of customer they value. So: no bet!

I pointed out to him one of the sacrosanct rules of sports gambling, not to mention contracts in general: Once both parties agree to the wager, the bet stands, unless it is canceled by mutual agreement.

The boss man explained to me that the only "rule" that really counted was that he was holding the money and, therefore, could make up the regulations as he went along. And if I didn't like it, too bad. And if I complained too much, I might never see any of my money again. You got a problem wit dat?

I reluctantly agreed to the cancellation of my wagers and spent five anxious days waiting to see if the money from my closed account would ever arrive back in the United States. (It did, thankfully – minus about \$100 for "transaction fees.")

It gets worse.

The most recent stain in the offshore sports book industry's dirty underwear concerns self-proclaimed provisos that blatantly "sanction" the books to keep your money at will.

Several well-known VBOs, some of which have recently enjoyed gushing profiles in large-circulation men's magazines, have allowed themselves a veritable license to steal in the form of "confiscation clauses" buried within their house rules. These provisos are primarily meant to scare away professional bettors, but they can be exercised at the bookie's whim against anyone he chooses to victimize.

Here's one such clause, posted on a Web site under the heading of "fraud."

"Any and all bets placed in an attempt in any way to defraud [VBO] will be deemed void. Any and all bets made or contracted by any professional gambler or member, employee or associate of a professional sports-wagering group, or family member of such a person or group, who has not previously identified themselves to management, shall be voided and the balances in such accounts held by [the VBO]."

Here's another.

"Professional sports gamblers are not allowed membership at [our sports book]. If a suspected professional sports gambler does open an account at [our sports book, we] reserve the right to 1) cancel this account at any time without notice, and 2) refund any initial deposits made by the professional sports gambler into [his betting] account as [our sports book's] only liability towards any and all winnings the professional sports gambler may have achieved."

And here's a third, which I found on one Web site hidden under a link called "Terms and Conditions of Use."

"If we consider you to be a Restricted Individual, you are not permitted to register with us or to access our Wagering Services. If you circumvent our controls and do open an account with us, we reserve the right to 1) cancel your account without notice and 2) void all transactions you have made with us and refund your initial deposit back to you. We consider you a Restricted Individual if you (1) are under 18 years of age (2) reside in Canada or any jurisdiction where Internet gambling is expressly prohibited (3) have been banned for any reason by any govern-

ment licensed land or Internet-based casino or sports betting facility located anywhere in the world (4) are a bookmaker or an employee of a bookmaker using our Wagering Services in the course of your employment or (5) are a member of any type of professional gambling partnership or syndicate.”

It’s bad enough that the books operating out of distant Third World offices can keep your money whenever they please, but now you’re forced to agree to it beforehand. To play with these shops, you must accept terms that are, in no uncertain terms, unacceptable.

Now, granted, many bookmakers aren’t prepared to deal with gamblers who know more about sports betting than they do. Even a number of betting shops on the Don Best Premium feed, an instant odds service that tracks the flow of “smart money” around the world, abhor so-called “wiseguy” business. (The Don Best Premium feed costs \$500 a month; what kind of gambler do these bookmakers think they’re going to attract? Ten-dollar teaser bettors?)

Nonetheless, none of the reputable wiseguy-phobic outfits, including the brick-and-mortar sports books in Nevada, would ever stoop to a confiscation clause. While most sports books, in Nevada and offshore, will chase away players they believe are sharp, trying instead to build a clientele of total squares with no chance to win, the vast majority of these outfits handle the money honorably. Typically, these books simply pay off sharp winning players, then immediately close their accounts.

But I’m not a professional gambler, you might claim.

And you might or might not be. Doesn’t matter either way. The books with the provisos can stiff a player and be totally within their rules, so long as they *proclaim* him to be a professional.

This situation is akin to a totalitarian government that

prosecutes its citizenry for thinking unpure thoughts. Scared of being brought before a fascist tribunal, the populace learns to keep their thoughts to themselves or, even safer, purge thoughts in general from their mind. Likewise, gamblers who play with shops that have a “professionals-not-allowed” clause become conditioned to lose. For if they pick winners consistently (which is what professional gamblers supposedly do) at a demonstrably higher rate than the 50% clip the average punter manages, they’ve been forewarned that their money will be confiscated.

Let’s forget for a moment that everyone who opens an account with an offshore bookie is trying to win, even if he doesn’t necessarily believe it’s going to happen; he’s still going to try. Let’s also conveniently ignore for a moment that everyone who opens an account with an offshore bookie has a reasonable chance to hit a hot streak in which he picks substantially more winners than losers. Let’s also set aside the obvious fact that even the dumbest squirrel in the tree occasionally stumbles upon an acorn — which might, for instance, take the form of a long-shot six-team baseball parlay.

The VBO’s “professional-gambler” provision allows them to unilaterally decide to keep (steal) your money. It’s right there in their rules, and there’s not a damn thing you can do about it — is there?

My experience of not getting paid on my winning wagers led me to wonder about the bigger picture. After all, this VBO has been “endorsed” by myriad Web sites and magazines. So I called several of those that had recommended the place so highly, the ones that had promised me that I would be dealing with one of the most reputable and honorable operations in the business. I told them what had happened to me. They made all the appropriate noises — “That’s shocking! We’ll look into this right away!” — and subsequently did nothing. Well, not exactly nothing. They continued to cheerfully tout this VBO as the



best offshore bookmaking operation on the planet.

This puzzled me. I couldn't comprehend how Web sites and publications that were ostensibly "looking out for the players" could know of the VBO's indiscretions, yet still promote the shop. (Yes, I was woefully naive.) Strange, I thought. Maybe I'm the only person ever jerked around by this place.

Then I did a little investigating. I learned I wasn't the only victim. Dozens of people had lodged complaints (on gambler's forums and with the offshore sports betting "watchdog" agencies) about this and other VBOs canceling bets, withholding winnings, and threatening to confiscate accounts if the aggrieved bettor made too much noise.

Still, the "watchdogs" continued to enthusiastically steer gamblers to their portals.

As Boss Tweed once famously said, "It ain't the votes that count. It's the people that do the counting that count." Tammany Hall; Costa Rica — the story's the same.

Turns out—stop me if you've heard this one before—VBOs often pay these (private) organizations to shill for them.

Imagine the magazine *Consumer Reports* being subsidized by Microsoft, Toyota, and Phillip Morris. Were it so, you'd certainly be forgiven for cocking a skeptical eyebrow when the magazine's Products of the Year turned out to be Marlboro cigarettes, Camry sedans, and Windows 2000. In the shadowy world of offshore sports books, this kind of incestuous relationship is depressingly common—only none of the so-called consumer advocates bothers to alert their readers to the arrangement.

Despite their impassioned protestations of innocence, despite the "good deeds" they claim to have performed on behalf of aggrieved gamblers, anything these "watchdogs" say—or endorse, or whatever—should be taken with a heaping handful (forget the grain) of salt. Most of these "watchdogs" shill for dishonorable VBOs, despite

being intimately familiar with the book's track record.

I decided to contact one alleged "Offshore Watchdog" (OW) after reviewing its list of endorsed sports books and discovering that it contained two genuine stinkers. I called the 800 number and told the OW that a prominent outfit, one of the shops on their list, had taken six months to pay me one weekend's worth of winnings. After professing their shock at my discouraging news, the OW never did a thing besides equivocate — and they continue to shill for the joint. Which makes perfect sense, since it's highly probable that it helped fund the OW. Far from being "watchdogs," many OWs are merely marketing organizations for the books that pay them.

One sports book manager, whose Curacao-based shop appears on one OW's list, admitted to me that the OW was just another promotional tool for him, a cheap marketing play on a price-versus-appearance basis. But as far as actually being a consumer advocate? He tried to address that question, but he was laughing too hard.

Another of the so-called OWs claims to provide an "open forum" where the free exchange of information and ideas will make the offshore sports-betting world a better and safer place for those who send their money to distant lands. Originally an outlet to sell picks on sporting events, the site's founder discovered that the watchdog business was far more lucrative. After proving to be a below-average game picker and an above-average promoter, the brains behind the site began "covering" (as in journalistically) the offshore bookmaking world — and, incidentally, accepting advertisements from those he was "covering."

As you might surmise, the necessary separation of Church and State, of advertising and editorial, which must exist if a publication intends its critical writing about potential advertisers to be credible, does not exist here. Indeed, one site features comically horrible articles written by someone who works as a paid consultant to

the marketing department of a larcenous VBO. Thus, while it's a nice concept in theory, the OWs in practice do not believe in treating advertisers objectively. Their ethos seems to be, "If a sports book pays to appear on my site, their sins, past and present, are automatically absolved — at least until enough people raise a fuss about them." In such cases they tend to remove the offenders for a time, only to reinstate them when the clamor from disgruntled players dies down.

The condition is surprisingly widespread. In fact, even formerly trustworthy OWs become compromised by the incestuous relationship between self-proclaimed lookouts and the sports books who pay their bills. As these Internet watchdogs grow (and attract more advertising money), they inevitably begin to promote several sports books that engage in unsavory practices. Freedom of speech is still tolerated on some of the OW message boards, but the rapidly deteriorating ethical standards of even the best-intentioned OW sites make them better resources for promotion-hungry bookies than concerned gamblers.

This all may seem like much ado about a not-very-clever con. In fact, the equivocations and obfuscations of the OWs are darkly funny to long-time observers. But the uninitiated, who stumble across the various OW Web sites in search of guidance, can be easily misled. The people behind the exceedingly clever (and official-looking) monikers and acronyms that the OWs employ are promoters first and foremost, and their pitches can be compelling.

Which leads to a related question that you may, by now, be asking. Why, the sensible person might justifiably wonder, would anyone in their right mind play with one of these patently bad offshore shops? I mean, trying to win a sports bet at 4.54% the worst of it is difficult enough. Gamblers shouldn't have to worried about getting paid.

One possibility is that longtime customers of certain VBOs that close accounts or confiscate funds may have been (accurately) pegged as stone cold idiots. Otherwise, they'd have been asked to leave a long time ago. In reality, the average gambler wins some and loses some, and never accumulates enough net winnings, even if running lucky, to draw attention to his account. Hence, the relationship survives. If the bettor is going to lose anyway, it will never really matter that he's dealing with a suspect book. But if fortune happens to smile too widely, watch out!

Why do sensible people sign up with bad bookies in the first place? Usually it's because someone trustworthy told them to. Someone — or something, like a full-page ad in a national magazine — told the unsuspecting gambler that there was nothing to worry about. Someone steered an ignorant player in the wrong direction, all the while assuring him (and thousands of others) that he was making a sound decision. Like Jim Jones leading his followers into the Guyana jungle, where deadly Kool-Aid awaited them, these authoritative voices knowingly lead legions of pigeons to the slaughterhouse.

Don't be lulled by slick presentations. One great advantage enjoyed by the VBOs is their VBBs — as in Very Big Bankrolls. Those bankrolls often pay for expensive ads and beautiful four-color brochures. Some of these VBOs delight in repeatedly reminding you of their greatness through enough direct-mail campaigns to wipe out an entire old-growth forest. Once you get on their mailing list, you can look forward to weekly greetings from your would-be best buddies in Central America. Every other time you open your mailbox, you'll find it stuffed with flashily produced testimonials, glowingly reminding you that this or that VBO is the world's biggest and best sports book.

As I write this report, the mailman has arrived with the day's delivery. For the second time this month, I've gotten junk mail from a VBO. Adding insult to injury,

it's the same one that unceremoniously showed me the door just months ago. (But they sure do have nice-looking half-naked ladies on their advertisements, and the fruit baskets they send out at Christmas are awful swell.)

So then, where is it safe to play?

The answer depends on what kind of gambler you are. As alluded to earlier, if you're a casual bettor, a "leisure" player as the bookies say, you're going to lose most (if not all) of your bankroll anyway if you play long enough. But you at least want the pleasure of the occasional hot streak before your inevitable demise. So it's fundamental that you avoid the notorious sports books that are basically elaborate excuses for credit-card fraud. These con artists will rob you of your money, not to mention your fleeting pleasure. A comprehensive list of such miscreants can be found in a diligent Internet search.

So much for the outright thieves, liars, and cheats. There are hundreds of bookmakers offshore who won't steal, won't cheat, and won't threaten. Your money is probably as secure with them as any FDIC-insured bank. That's the good news. The bad news is I can't recommend playing with them either. If you're a "serious" player — that is to say you do research and shop for good numbers and manage your money responsibly — you probably bet more than the chronic loser and, at the end of the season, might even show a profit for your troubles. In other words, you're good, which means many offshore bookies don't want your business. These guys are known as "shoemakers" or "dressmakers," bookies who will only court your action if they're certain you'll lose. Much like casinos that bar card counters from their blackjack games, these bookmakers/shoemakers aren't clever enough to handle so-called "smart" action; they resent that some gamblers know more about betting sports than the average bookie does, and they do everything in their power to chase away anyone but bona fide buffoons. And when they do, you can forget about that nice 10%-20% deposit

bonus you were counting on; that's only for "good" (read: "losing") customers.

These losers-only joints, also known colloquially as "clones," since they primarily follow the line moves of the bigger and more expert shops, do not rob their customers. In fact, most of them have impeccable reputations for paying. If you're a sharp player, however, they will make it eminently clear in a panoply of ways that your business is not appreciated.

Many of these clone joints don't necessarily want to book bets, anyway. They want to either bet on the games themselves with other bookies or guess at the "hot" sides favored by wiseguy betting syndicates. A startling number of offshore shops move their pointspreads up and down without ever taking a wager, thereby forfeiting the magic "juice" that, over the long run, makes most bookies very wealthy fellows. Then they wonder why the sharps beat them and the squares stay away.

One of the surest ways to dissuade action (and, when it happens, an easy way for bettors to identify a churn joint) is to stall a customer on the phone, making him wait interminably while the line moves. Imagine discovering that a company whose stock you own is going to announce that their eagerly awaited wonder drug has been shown in clinical tests to cause mice to grow an extra tail. You call your broker to dump your stock. His secretary puts you on hold for ten minutes while the price plunges.

This goes on almost daily at many offshore shops. News leaks out of a key injury in the Pistons-Lakers game. You call up to make a bet before ESPN breaks the story on SportsCenter. Now, if the bookie has noticed that the line tends to move after you make your bets, you can count on him employing the old four-corner offense. (Remember, this is a putatively honest bookie that pays, so you're still making bets with him, even as he discourages your business.)

In an article on the sports gambling Web site *The Daily Spread*, Heath Bouthwell accurately described what happens next:

*You've never seen such a chronic outbreak of amnesia and blindness in all your life:*

Once they get your pin number, these seemingly educated, nimble, English-speaking, able-bodied, healthy clerks no longer “habla ingles,” — or they can’t see the board, or they drop the phone, or whatever their routine of the moment is to lay down a stall.

*Note: The quicker you ask for the game, the longer it takes them to enunciate their syllables. The really good/experienced clerks will respond with something like this.*

*"Okaaayyyy siiirrr, leeetttt mmmmmeeeeeee  
seeeeeeeeeee ... thaaaaaaattttsssss" (sounds of mind-  
less clatter in the background as clerk feigns an attempt  
to pull the game up on his terminal) "gaaaaaaaaaaaam-  
mmmmmmeeeeeeee nuummmbeer" (more clatter; his  
damn arthritis must be acting up, poor guy) "706/707,  
riiiiiiiiiggggghhhhhhtttt??? Okaaayyyy, leeeettss  
seeeeeee thhhhheeeeeee ..."*

*Boom! The line starts to change everywhere and they snap out of their trance and start spitting out well formed sentences faster than that guy in the FedEx commercial:*

*"The Pistons are six and eighty-four, sir!"*

*They proclaim this proudly – as if they had the line there all along, but just couldn't quite find it. And once they did finally "locate" it, boy, they've got a crucial obligation to deliver it to you in a hurry! Can't keep the customer waiting!*

Because I know some of the top gamblers in the world and am privy to their advice and wisdom on betting sports, I have been booted, chased, and harangued for

winning, playing “steam,” being “too smart,” and generally not being “the kind of customer we’re looking for.” Because I’ve done my homework and have for years paid very close attention to all matters concerning Internet bookmaking and betting, I’ve formed conclusions as to which shops are likely to adhere to the highest overall standards of forthrightness and honor.

Conversely, I have informed opinions about shops that do not meet what I consider high standards. There are, I’m afraid, hundreds of this ilk, many of which you’ll never encounter—too many, in fact, to list here. The higher-profile shops that fall under the heading “Places I Wouldn’t Send a Friend” appear below:

All World	Jaguar
Betmaker.com	Millennium
Bowman’s	NASA International
Darwin All Sports	SBG Global
Diamond International	SOS
First Fidelity Deposit	SportingbetUSA
Gameday	Sportbet.com
Horizon	Sportsbetting.com
Infinity	VIP Sports
International Island	William Hill
Intertops	

You may not find these sports books on any sort of warning list, because most of them don’t ostensibly do anything “wrong” — such as abscond with your deposit. Be aware, however, that these shops are meant for losers only; i.e., if you play with these shops you are probably a loser, since long-term winners are usually shown the door.

To be fair, no bookmaker is in business to lose, and the onshore sports books of Las Vegas are often no better than their expatriate brethren. The Las Vegas Hilton Superbook, an enormous operation housed in a casino



the size of an airplane hangar, is notorious for chasing out anyone they suspect has a chance of winning, and some of the newer megaresorts, like the Venetian, impose betting limits worthy of a barroom bookie working out of Alaquippa, Pennsylvania. But there's one compelling difference between the ons and the offs: No matter how bad the customer service, no matter how weak the lines, the Vegas bookies are regulated and accountable.

But we can't all get to Las Vegas whenever we want to make a bet.

So what's the avid sports gambler to do? In a phrase: Be skeptical, be cautious, and don't believe the hype.

Despite the unsavory picture I've generally painted about the offshore books, I can recommend several operations wholeheartedly. If the majority of bookmakers conducted their business with the integrity and fairness that the following outfits consistently do, I would feel confident endorsing the offshore-sports-book industry as a whole. Up until now, at least, these elite few have been demonstrated to be safe, secure, smart shops that aren't afraid to take a bet. The following are the places that I would recommend to friends, the ones I think deserve your business.

**SportsMarket:** One of the last of the "old-time" bookmakers, SportsMarket realizes the key to being a successful bookie is writing tickets. Square, sharp — doesn't matter. If you're willing to lay them 11-10, they'll gladly (and professionally) book your wager. My personal favorite. Based in Curacao.

**W.I.T. Sports:** The acronym stands for "Whatever It Takes," and this shop, whose line manager was the longtime boss at the sports book at Caesars Palace in Las Vegas, bends over backwards to provide first-class customer service, interesting lines, and accommodat-

ing limits. Winners here are paid with a smile. Based in Costa Rica.

**CRIS/ABC Islands:** A huge operation known for booking the world's biggest and sharpest sports bettors. Most of the smaller shops imitate their lines, which are considered sharper than the lines out of Vegas. As solid as the industry gets. Based in Costa Rica.

**WWTS:** One of the pioneering offshore books famed for financial stability, fair business practices, and good customer service. This book is run like a small corporation, not some backroom sweatshop. Offers high limits and an even higher degree of trustworthiness. Based in Antigua.

**Olympic Sports:** Virtually every offshore wannabe bookie follows the line moves at this industry leader. Known for an enormous array of betting lines, this shop is both financially stable and fun to play with. Based in Jamaica.

**Canbet:** Licensed and bonded in Australia, where bookmaking has been legal for more than a century, Canbet books all the major American sports, as well as most of the favorite "international" matches. (Cricket, anyone?) Their Internet software is easy to use and, best of all, they charge only 7% juice (-107) on most straight bets.

## The Zine Mover

You're in Las Vegas. You've got money in your pocket. And you've got a strong opinion on the "Monday Night Football" match-up.

You wander into a sports book, where virtually every athletic contest in America has a price on it. You scan the boards, skipping over college football and a World Series game, searching for tonight's NFL line.

There it is: The Giants are favored by  $13\frac{1}{2}$  points over the Bears. You like the Giants, playing at home. However, even though you're certain the Giants will win the game,  $13\frac{1}{2}$  points seems like a lot to spot the Bears. That's almost two touchdowns, you think, fingering the money in your pocket. You hesitate, weighing the pros and cons. *Can the Giants win by two touchdowns? Well, on paper New York should dominate. ... Of course, Chicago might get a lucky last-minute break. ... On the other hand, the Giants usually play well at home on Monday night. ... Hmmm.*

Finally, you convince yourself the Giants are a good bet at  $13\frac{1}{2}$ . You approach the window, minutes before

the kick-off, ready to slide your stack of hundreds across the counter.

And then it happens: The  $13\frac{1}{2}$  changes to  $14\frac{1}{2}$ .

"Wait a minute," you tell the clerk. "I wanted to bet the Giants at thirteen and a half."

"Too late," he says, shrugging. "The line just moved. Should have bet five minutes ago."

Indeed. Now the Giants don't look so attractive. Now they have to win by *more than* two touchdowns. Now you might even bet the Bears.

"What happened?" you ask the clerk. "What happened to the odds?"

"Sir," the clerk says, smiling, "you just got stung by the Line Mover."

Welcome to the club.

The Line Mover is the most powerful – and successful – bettor in all of sports. He and his organization, a syndicate of approximately two dozen well-capitalized gamblers, exert the kind of influence over America's sports betting odds that, were it occurring on Wall Street, would be called manipulating the market. Regularly wagering as much as \$500,000 per football game, the Line Mover inspires fear in bookmakers, confusion in those who would try to piggy-back on his expertise, and hope in millions of casual sports bettors around the world who would like to think that there's someone out there who really can consistently beat the game.

Speaking on the condition of anonymity, the Line Mover sat down with me and revealed how America's biggest sports betting syndicate operates.

"It's pretty simple," he says flatly. "We find situations where we have way the best of it, and then we bet a whole lot of money. Do that enough and you end up with a nice little profit."

How nice? He won't say exactly. But the Line Mover does volunteer that over the past five years he has paid on average \$3 million in taxes on his winnings. "We do

pretty well," he deadpans, nodding contentedly.

Of the Line Mover, Michael "Roxy" Roxborough, who for many years ran the company that produces the Las Vegas line, says, "Anybody can walk into a Nevada sports book and bet on a game. The truth is, we don't worry about the average gambler. We worry about [the Line Mover]. There's only four or five guys we're really concerned about. We design the line with these guys in mind. Sports betting is a game of skill. Give a really skillful sports bettor a big bankroll and he's dangerous. A guy like [the Line Mover] is the reason we have limits. He's the reason we have to be so careful."

Of Roxy Roxborough, the man who spends each working day trying to take his money, the Line Mover says, "The man has a very difficult job. He's trying to make a line for the casinos to get two-sided action [equal bets on both teams], and he does a good job at that. But he can't keep up with me, because I'm the tenth of one percent that consistently wins. If Roxy ever does catch up, I'll quit tomorrow. In the meantime, even though I think Roxy is a good and admirable opponent, I know I'm going to beat him year in and year out."

America's biggest sports bettor accomplishes this feat by identifying games where the line is "off," or, by his calculations, slightly mistaken. By his reckoning, a football line that is incorrect by a half point gives him close to a 7% advantage, depending on the number in question. A line that's off by three points — well, that's a monstrous edge. The trick, of course, is finding games in which the Las Vegas line is wrong.

Enter the computers. The Line Mover is famous in the gambling world for using up to a half-dozen sophisticated computer programs, custom-designed to evaluate past performance and predict future results. He won't say what the computers are searching for — "That would be like the magician telling you how he cuts the girl in half," he jokes — but he does reveal that the criteria, when

processed properly, yield a chillingly accurate “power rating” that reduces every college and NFL football team to a quantifiable number. Employing a full-time team of handicappers, statistics-obsessed computer junkies who generate a series of daily reports, the Line Mover considers his analysts’ data and decides where his organization’s money will be invested. “My talent isn’t handicapping the games,” he admits. “My expertise is handicapping the handicappers — and knowing the best time to bet.”

The Line Mover’s sense of timing, his nearly extrasensory understanding of how — and *when* — the public will bet a sporting contest, is perhaps his greatest attribute. “I can’t emphasize how important timing is in my business. A half-point either way can make or break my profit. So some games we’ll bet early Monday morning, some five minutes before the kick-off. All depends what kind of price we think we can get.”

Casino sports books constantly adjust their lines based on the amount of money coming in. If, for example, everyone in Nevada seems to be favoring the Giants, the price on them will go up, making a bet on their counterpart, the Bears, more attractive. By offering odds that encourage two-way betting, the bookmakers can keep their accounts fairly balanced, avoiding big swings and virtually guaranteeing a profit. (Since the bookies charge \$11 to win \$10, \$1 million bet on both sides of a game ensures them a \$50,000 profit.) When the Line Mover makes his plays, an enormous amount of money comes in on one side, so the bookmakers quickly change their odds to dissuade other gamblers from taking the heavily bet side and encourage them to wager on the lightly bet side. The trick for the Line Mover is to get his money down *before* the bookmakers adjust their lines.

Every time the Line Mover bets a game, hundreds of bettors try to jump on his action. If “the middlers,” as the Line Mover calls them, get their bets down at various

casinos before the Line Mover does, the odds change, fluctuating by the precious half-point (or more) that makes or breaks his profit.

Also, since no single casino will accept the \$250,000-and-up bets that the Line Mover makes, in order to get all their money in play, he and his people are forced to make dozens of smaller bets with dozens of bookies around the world.

This is a sore subject with the Line Mover. He denies that he and his organization bet with illegal bookies, but knowledgeable sources say that the Line Mover would be incapable of plying his trade if he didn't use bookies in, for instance, Dallas, Atlanta, New York, and Chicago. "Try betting three hundred thousand on a regular-season college football game," one professional sports bettor explains. "The local casinos here in Vegas just aren't going to fade [take] that kind of action. And even if they would, you could never get a fair price. By the time you bet your first fifty-thousand, they would start moving the line on you."

Thus, a typical play by the Line Mover works like this. He and his analysts find a game that's "off." Using a pre-determined formula — a half-point warrants a \$50,000 bet, two points warrant \$250,000, and in rare cases, some lines inspire bets of \$1 million — the Line Mover selects his best plays of the day. Some weekends he'll bet as many as 25 college and NFL games; sometimes he'll only bet a handful. "I gamble for value, not action," he says. "I bet by a strict formula. So there's no 'get-even' or 'get-rich' bets. If the numbers don't look good, I pass."

After deciding which contests his organization will bet on, the Line Mover sends out instructions to his associates, via a numerical pager. When the signal goes out to make a play, the Line Mover's team members attempt to make their bet immediately and simultaneously, before the illegal bookies and legal Nevada sports books can adjust their lines unfavorably. Smart bookmakers,

recognizing the source of the large bets, often bet with the Line Mover, “laying off” or hedging their money with another, unsuspecting, bookmaker. (Others merely try to avoid taking his bets.) Within minutes, bookmakers in every region of America – and often offshore – are flooded with fresh money, all on one team. Within a few more minutes, the official Las Vegas line moves to reflect the imbalance.

That’s why they call him the Line Mover.

He wasn’t always the king of the sports bettors. The man who is now widely regarded as one of the most powerful forces in all of gambling was, twenty years ago, indistinguishable from thousands of other wishful thinkers. “I bet on everything at the start and, like everybody else, I lost,” the Line Mover remembers. A successful businessman with a chain of appliance stores throughout the Midwest, the Line Mover blew off hundreds of thousands of dollars to local bookies. “It took me a long time to figure out that just reading the morning sports paper wouldn’t cut it. Just studying the box scores doesn’t work.” Instead, he sought out the best minds in the game, the brilliant computer programmers and data analysts who would revolutionize the way we bet on sports. He made them a deal: You provide me with the best information and I’ll provide you with the money to do something with it. “And that’s how our team was born.”

While the Line Mover professes to still love sports, he says, “If my life depended on it, I couldn’t tell you who’s leading the divisions. I don’t even look at the sports pages much. I’m a money manager, not an action-hungry sports fan. Your average sports bettor reads something in the paper or hears something on television and figures he’s got some kind of insider information.”

Indeed, the professional touts, so-called “experts” who sell their opinions to gullible gamblers via expensive 900 lines, help the Line Mover win his yearly millions. “People follow these touts blindly, like they’re in a cult.



Ninety percent of the time I bet against the tout's opinion. See, by promoting one side of a game so vigorously, they can sometimes move the line four, five, six points. That," he says, smiling broadly, "tends to create some very profitable situations."

The Super Bowl, according to the Line Mover, is a prime example. For five of the past six years, he says, the line has been dramatically off. Wildly off. "Only problem is, the public's been right. I've bet on every loser."

He says this with a grin, looking very much like a man who is used to being right far more often than he is wrong, a man who can afford to lose a sports bet now and again — a man who is accustomed to knowing before the rest of the world which way the line is going to move.

# 11

## *Holy Macan!*

Hydrofoils from Hong Kong depart for the island of Macau every day of the year, every hour of the day, every fifteen minutes. The ride across the South China Sea is remarkably smooth and pleasantly scenic. But the hundreds of passengers who take this train-on-the-water aren't interested in the craggy shoreline or the lumbering fishing boats the hydrofoil leaves in its wake. Like children in the backseat of the family station wagon, they just want to get there.

Because Macau, a Portuguese protectorate for more than 400 years until it was handed back to China in 1999, has something you can't find in Hong Kong: casinos.

These are not genteel European parlors or spacious American-style ballrooms, outfitted with plush carpets and ersatz chandeliers. They're gambling factories. A few of the island's eight casinos are the size of a decent Wal-Mart—and most have about as many "shoppers." Even on an otherwise tranquil Sunday afternoon, the casinos of Macau are easily the most crowded gambling joints you've ever seen, with bettors three and four deep at every table, elbowing their countrymen aside to get

some money on the sacred green felt. An uninitiated visitor from, say, Las Vegas might presume the casinos had some sort of generous promotion in force — blackjack pays 2-1, perhaps — or that they had momentarily lost their finely calibrated sense of larceny and were simply giving away money. But closer inspection reveals the action at the tables is merely business as usual. The thousands of patrons clamoring to get their bets down just really like to gamble.

That is to say they *really* like to gamble. I mean, they are stone-cold-out-of-their-minds crazy about gambling.

The casinos of Macau are easily the most animated wagering palaces you've ever seen. On hands of chemin de fer (known as "baccarat" along Las Vegas Boulevard), opposing sides shout friendly curses at each other in Cantonese, trying vainly to change the spots on a fateful card. Applause and groaning accompany the outcome of each hand — and it's not polite routine-par-on-the-PGA-Tour applause, or mock I-didn't-really-need-that-money groaning, either. This is the real stuff. The actors in Macau's quotidian drama emote so convincingly because they care so profoundly about every hand. Which is understandable, since most bets here seem to represent a sizable portion of the protagonists' life savings.

The minimum wager at most tables is between \$15 and \$25. But nobody bets the minimum. Even young men, very young men, in their late teens maybe, who proudly wear "American Original Playboy Spirit" windbreakers and have cultivated something resembling a moustache above their tender lips — even these lads wager sums that would make the typical Vegas high roller feel like a candidate for the all-you-can-eat buffet line. The prevailing thinking among the gamblers here seems to be, "Small is bad; big is good." The nearer your wager to the house maximum (US\$100,000 in the VIP rooms), the nearer, it seems, to nirvana. Even the chips, laminated plastic discs

the size of your kitchen sink drain, seem to suggest that bigger is indeed better.

This compulsion to plunge it all away on the bounce of a ball or the turn of a domino, according to several residents of Hong Kong, can be explained as an obscure symptom of the city's absurd real-estate market. One young professional, a bond trader who pays more than \$100,000 a year in rent for his high-rise apartment, says, "Even if you have a decent job, you can't afford to ever buy a decent apartment. So you gamble. In Hong Kong you have to gamble if you want to keep up."

Then there's the no-nonsense point of view. "We Chinese, we just love to gamble," says Tony Liu, Vice President of Oriental Marketing at the Trump Taj Mahal, in Atlantic City. "Win or lose, we don't care. We just love to play. And as long as we have some money in front of us, we won't stop."

Though most ethnic generalizations are about as trustworthy as loaded dice, anyone in the gaming business will tell you there are no more "dedicated" players than the Chinese. Indeed, most Chinese gamblers will tell you the same thing. "We're born to gamble," says Danny, a "dedicated" gambler who works in management at a Hong Kong hotel. "Chinese don't fool around. We come to win, to make a big score. It's in our blood."

According to Larry Clark, the Taj Mahal's Executive Vice President of Casino Operations, whose Dragon Room caters to high-rolling Asians, casinos across America would love to capture even a small slice of the Oriental market. Outside of California, where special Asian-games sections draw concert-size crowds, the Taj's Dragon Room is among the largest Asian gambling arenas outside of Asia. "I was inspired by the Asian games I'd seen in Macau, and I wanted to recreate the atmosphere of excitement and mystique," Clark says.

In one respect he's been hugely successful. The Dragon Room, like its antecedents in Macau, is always

packed. On a typical weekend night or early morning, every seat at every table is occupied, with an eager crowd waiting for space to become available. Not surprisingly, Tony Liu, the marketer, says he has more than 20,000 names in his database of invited guests.

Fifteen times a year, the Taj puts on Asian-themed shows in its convention-center showroom, featuring the Madonnas and Tony Bennetts of China, Vietnam, and the Philippines. These extravaganzas, which consistently attract audiences of 4,000, usually don't begin until 2 a.m., when most Atlantic City revelers are contemplating the charms of a final cognac and a down pillow. Tony Liu explains, "Many of our customers close their shops and restaurants around ten or eleven. We have to give them time to drive here."

This preference for late-night revelries is just one of the stylistic differences between Occidental and Oriental bettors. Most Western gamblers like the casino's complimentary booze; Asian gamblers prefer coffee. Most Westerners are mildly health conscious; players in the casinos of Macau (and the casinos that would imitate them) smoke like overheated engines. Most Westerners play for three or four hours at a stretch; Hong Kongers in Macau bet for up to 48 hours straight—or until they've gone bust. Westerners generally like slots and craps and blackjack; the Chinese players love an inscrutable domino game called Pai Gow. If a Westerner has \$20,000 to his name, he might be willing to play with \$5,000 of it (and that's if he's a wild man); if a Chinese guy has \$20,000 to his name, he'll bet at least that much, and more if he's got a good line of credit.

"There's no bigger gamblers than the Chinese," Larry Clark says. "Any culture with a Judeo-Christian background, gambling has a stigma. With the Chinese it's accepted. It's a way of life."



Nothing illustrates Clark's assertion better than a visit to the Happy Valley racetrack, wedged surreally beneath a field of skyscrapers in the heart of Hong Kong. A typical Wednesday night of horse racing draws close to 50,000 screaming patrons; weekend programs at the Sha Tin horse-racing complex, in a nearby suburb, draw as many as 90,000 spectators. And they're not just watching the ponies run around in circles. In 1997, the Hong Kong Jockey Club, which manages the racetracks, handled more than HK\$93 billion in wagers.

That's about US\$12 billion.

According to Henry Chan, the Jockey Club's Director of Betting, "Horse racing is a way of life for us. It's entertainment and it's sport. But even more it's like an art. Chinese people love to study the forms, to handicap the races. It's really our national sport."

As the only legalized form of gambling in Hong Kong beside a national lottery, the racetracks are highly regulated—and, of course, highly profitable. (Hong Kong's one-day betting record is currently US\$326,810,000.) Each year the Jockey Club donates HK\$1-\$2 billion to the community. Proceeds from horse racing helped build the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, the Castle Peak Hospital and the Hong Kong Football Stadium. In fact, the Hong Kong Jockey Club is among the top-ten charitable foundations in the world.

This becomes possible when, in a country with a total population of 6 million, 750,000 people have telephone betting accounts and a million people bet each race day at one of 125 off-course outlets.

The Chinese cultural stereotype—highly superstitious, fascinated by the concept of luck—may have some truth to it, Chan concedes. "But horses are a game of skill. And besides," Chan adds, "Chinese don't see betting on horses as 'gambling.' It's *playing*. We work hard and we play hard. Here in Hong Kong we have small homes and little leisure time. A day at the races is a most civilized

relief from our hectic lives.”

Given this kind of nationwide equine fervor, casino gambling is hardly necessary, Chan says. “The government doesn’t want to encourage additional gambling in Hong Kong. We wish Macau was even farther away,” he says, laughing.



Chan’s dream notwithstanding, millions of other residents of this frenetic city find their escape across the water, far from the exactas and quinellas of Happy Valley. They go to Macau, where an instant fortune is only a turn of a card away.

Many of the games in the casinos here are difficult for Western eyes to decipher. Some, like Pai Gow, are played with dominoes, which the locals slap, fondle, and when they really need a winner, caress like small birds, reading the dots with their fingers instead of their eyes. Others, like Dai-Siu, employ dice, and players bet if the total of three die will be “big” or “small.” The odds, you can be sure, are skewed worse than the prop bets on a crap table, not that anyone in Macau seems to mind terribly.

The most peculiar of these casino games is called Fan Tan, an ancient Chinese diversion made modern by the presence of croupiers, pit bosses, and hordes of eager gamblers. The dealer covers a large pile of porcelain buttons with a silver cup, pushes the shrouded pile toward the center of the table, and removes the cover, like a waiter in a classical French restaurant. He then divides the pile of buttons into groups of four. Players bet on whether, after the division, there will be 0, 1, 2, or 3 remaining buttons.

Much frivolity is enjoyed by all, especially the studious types, who keep dense detailed charts of the results, which, they suppose, help divine a pattern in the sublime randomness of the button pile.

Whereas most casinos in America are wall-to-wall slot machines, few of what the Chinese call “hungry tigers” line the walls of Macau’s casinos. They seem like so many forlorn afterthoughts, homely girls waiting to be asked for a dance. The handful of video poker machines are even lonelier, and for good reason. Most gamblers here have no concept of basic strategy, and even if they did it would do them no good. The pay tables are laughable—6 coins for a full house, 5 for a flush—and most machines have a “war” feature that encourages players to double their winnings by challenging the machine to a game of “high card wins.” This being Macau, most players gladly do battle until they blithely convert their profits into nothing.

Blackjack games are rare. On a recent visit, the Casino Jai Alai, a warehouse-size emporium near the ferry terminal, had one blackjack table. The Mandarin Oriental had two.

The rules are surprisingly good—dealer stands on soft 17; surrender available against a dealer 10—but card-counting is ineffectual, since the dealer burns a card on every hand and three of the eight decks in play get cut off, drastically reducing penetration. Not that professional card counters would want to ply their trade here, anyway. The casinos of Macau, operated under a government franchise by the Sociedade de Turismo e Diversões de Macau, are controlled by a man named Stanley Ho. It is widely rumored in both Hong Kong and the States that Mr. Ho has intimate relationships with plenty of unsavory characters. “The last place you would want to try anything clever is Macau,” one professional blackjack player, based in Nevada, says. “Ho is richer than God, and almost as powerful.”

White-skinned gamblers, do, in fact, stand out from the crowd, if only because of sheer novelty. Most of the Chinese gamblers, Scotch-taping their chips into tidy stacks before firing off \$20,000 bets on a hand of baccarat,



are too busy tempting fate (and bad odds) to pay attention to a stray “ghost.” At Casino Lisboa, a four-story gambling emporium with higher limits the farther up you ride the escalator, the only denizens of the place that seem interested in Western visitors are dozens of hookers, who have mastered the rudiments of roulette, as well as the English phrases “happy time” and “go to my room.”

The pungently charged atmosphere in Macau is redolent of the old Vegas: fast money, fast women, reality blurred by the intoxicating clatter of chips and dice and dominoes. But lest a daydreaming visitor imagine he’s been magically transported to Nevada back when gangsters called the shots and hedonism flowed as freely as wine at a bacchanal, signs posted on the casino’s walls announce in no uncertain terms that this isn’t the Fabulous Flamingo circa 1946, but a wild gambling-drunk island off the coast of China. In three languages they say, “Please do not spit on the floor.”