

Sports wagering would provide immediate relief for Monmouth Park

STEPHEN EDELSON, STAFF COLUMNIST 6:02 p.m. EDT October 16, 2014



(Photo: PETER ACKERMAN/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER)

OCEANPORT – I'm still not sure if Dennis Drazin is a rare visionary or just plain crazy.

To imagine a long-term plan to keep Monmouth Park relevant in the face of daunting financial obstacles is heroic. To almost singlehandedly take on every major sports association as part of that quest is downright insane.

And now the advisor to the New Jersey Thoroughbred Horsemen's Association is poised for another legal showdown with the NCAA, NFL, MLB, NBA and NHL, this time with what he feels is the backing of language provided by the Third Circuit Court of Appeals last year.

What I do know is that Drazin is right.

If Gov. Chris Christie signs the sports wagering bill the state Assembly passed Thursday, Monmouth Park will immediately announce they will begin accepting wagers on sporting events Oct. 26, one day after the 45-day stand-down they agreed to last month.

"We're going to force their hand," Drazin said.

Monmouth Park, a cornerstone of the state's long-neglected horse racing industry, needs, and deserves, an alternative revenue stream in the face of withering competition from Racinos – race tracks with on-site casino's supplementing purse money – in surrounding states.

And Delaware is one of four states where sports betting is legal.

"It's exciting. There's been a lot of lawyering and court appearances," said Drazin of the legal battle that has stretched on for more than two years. "But I think that intellectually, everyone still comes up and asks the same question: why can four states take bets in this country and the rest cannot? That doesn't seem legal. It doesn't seem constitutional."

As to the constitutionality, the U.S. Supreme Court declined hear the case in June, leaving Drazin and the state clinging to language from last year's ruling in the Third Circuit, where the permanent injunction the league's got from U.S. District Judge Michael Shipp in 2012 was upheld.

Drazin expects the leagues to seek a temporary restraining order to try and stop them from accepting wagers later this month.

"We've done exactly what the Third Circuit said we can do during the course of litigation," Drazin said. "The leagues have to persuade a judge that they ultimately have a likelihood of winning the case. They have to show that irreparable harm would happen to them if they don't get relief, and a balancing of the public interest, whether it's against public interest to start taking bets without the court ruling on the case. And again given the public outcry that they would like to bet, and that it's a \$500-billion industry in this country being conducted illegally, I think the country is better protected with us doing sports betting than having to go to your local bookie, and whatever that may entail."

In September, the leagues filed to have a request for clarification of Shipp's ruling by Attorney General John Hoffman denied, with the state trying to determine if repealing sports betting laws put them in violation of the Professional and Amateur Sports Protection Act, which bans sports betting outside Nevada, Montana, Oregon and Delaware.

That came just days after Christie issued a directive to cease any prosecution of sports wagering at casinos and race tracks. It was at that point that Monmouth Park agreed to wait 45 days before doing anything.

Drazin's done waiting.

With the track expected to lose between \$3 and \$4-million this year, about what they lost in 2013, the first year the NJTHA leased the facility from the state, they need relief, and they need it now.

On Monday they broke ground on a 7,500-seat concert venue that currently has a price tag of \$12-million, part of their search for ways to make the track financially viable, while maintaining the quality of the racing product.

It looks like 2016 is the soonest casino-style gaming would be considered outside of Atlantic City, and it's not even assured Monmouth Park would receive a license, with the Meadowlands and Jersey City mentioned as possible sites.

So they continue to press forward.

Last year Monmouth Park formed sports wagering partnership with gambling giant William Hill, and spent the \$1-million they received from William Hill for its two-year sponsorship of the Haskell Invitational to prepare an area that will house the sports book initially. They also formed their own regulatory board.

"We think the future is rosy," Drazin said.

And if anyone deserves a little racing luck, it's Drazin and Monmouth Park.

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