

U.S. Leagues Take Fresh Look At Sports Betting

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Two more commissioners of America's major sports leagues have said their organizations may reconsider their traditional opposition to the legalization and regulation of sports betting.

Rob Manfred, who became the new commissioner of Major League Baseball last month, said on February 5 that it is time to give the legalization of sports betting "fresh consideration."

"Gambling in terms of our society has changed its presence on legalization, and I think it's important for there to be a conversation between me and the owners [of baseball teams] about what our institutional position will be," Manfred told ESPN.

Gary Bettman, commissioner of the National Hockey League (NHL), also said Tuesday in Las Vegas that the NHL Board of Governors may have to review its position on sports betting if the league awards a franchise to Las Vegas.

As for the possibility of Nevada sportsbooks setting a betting line for NHL games including a Las Vegas team, Bettman hedged.

"That's something we will have to discuss at the appropriate time if we get to that point," Bettman said, according to the Las Vegas Review-Journal.

The comments by Bettman and Manfred followed an op-ed on sports betting last November in the New York Times by [Adam Silver](#), the commissioner of the National Basketball Association.

In his op-ed, Silver urged Congress to pass legislation to legalize sports betting and create a federal regulatory regime.

Silver followed up last week by telling ESPN he has talked to the commissioners of the other three major professional sports leagues about legalizing sports betting.

"I leave it to them to make any public statements they want to make on it," Silver said. "I will say that certainly all of them are interested in having a better understanding of the issue, and I know have assigned people in their organizations to study intensively the issue as well."

Silver's predecessor, David Stern, on Monday reiterated his support of sports betting at a sports management conference in New York City.

"I agree with Commissioner Silver that it's time," Stern said.

"Especially in the day and age of fantasy [sports], daily fantasy [leagues] ... It's still a game of skill and has its own set of issues ... but it's time."

The only steadfast opponent of sports betting among the four major U.S. sports leagues appears to be perhaps the most important one — the National Football League (NFL).

The NFL remains the most lucrative sports league in the world, with more than \$9bn in revenue in 2014 despite a cascade of scandalous headlines about domestic abuse, concussions and cheating.

"No," NFL spokesman Brian McCarthy said when asked if his league had a comment on Silver's meeting with the other commissioners about sports betting.

One thing the leagues remain united on is their opposition to [New Jersey's bill to decriminalize sports betting](#) at tracks and casinos in the Garden State.

On March 17, the [3rd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals](#) in Philadelphia is tentatively scheduled to hear New Jersey's appeal of a lower court's ruling against its sports-betting bill.

"The last thing the leagues want is for us to win our case because that would allow all the other states to have unregulated sports betting," said New Jersey State Senator Ray Lesniak, who authored the bill that lifts the state's regulations on sports betting.

Even though he wrote the New Jersey bill, Lesniak said he agrees with Silver that sports betting should be regulated by the federal government.

The reason New Jersey is pressing its case in the 3rd Circuit, Lesniak said, is to force the leagues to work with Congress on a framework for federal regulation.

"I believe that if we win at the 3rd Circuit, then Congress will be forced to act," he said.

Daniel L. Wallach, a gaming attorney in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, said the statements from the commissioners of the sports leagues may not be coincidental to the upcoming court hearing.

"The timing of these proclamations appears designed to influence the 3rd Circuit, which will be presiding over oral arguments in just a few weeks," Wallach said.

"The commissioners are trying to send a not-too-subtle message to the court that federal congressional reform is the only viable pathway to expanded legal sports betting."

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