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For DeLeo, casino politics is personal: Speaker's father a racetrack legend, but gambling foe

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By Michael Levenson

Al DeLeo spent 50 years working the floor at the Turf Club at Suffolk Downs, a handsome, courtly man in a tuxedo who greeted gamblers by name and showed them to their favorite tables overlooking the track. He often took his son, Bobby, with him to the members-only club, introducing him to the teller-window operators, janitors, dishwashers, waiters, and gamblers.

"He was a nice kid, a very nice kid," said Richard McBrine, who has been gambling at the track since 1946.

Well, that nice kid is now the speaker of the Massachusetts House, Robert A. DeLeo, who is fighting the biggest battle of his career by trying to push through a bill to license two casinos in Massachusetts and 750 slot machines at the state's four racetracks, including his late father's beloved workplace.

The memory of his father, and the pride of workers like him whom the speaker met as a young man, are fueling his fierce advocacy of expanded gambling, which he sees as an economic lifeline.

But DeLeo learned other lessons from his father, too, ones he has not spoken about as publicly.

Even though Al DeLeo loved the track, he recognized its dangers, to the point that he forbade his son from gambling. Robert DeLeo remembers one occasion when he bet on a horse, won, and bragged to his father.

"I was as proud as a peacock," he said in a recent interview. "I said, 'Hey, Dad, I won a race.' And he looked at me and said, 'You're going to lose too many. I don't want to hear it. Don't even go there, pal.'"

With the House set to take up the bill Tuesday, DeLeo is at a crucial juncture, balancing the concerns his father had about the dark side of gambling with his belief in the great economic potential of casino development in the state.

For the first time since he became speaker 15 months ago, he has put his stamp firmly on a bill and is driving it forcefully, making it possible, perhaps even likely, that the state will legalize expanded gambling this spring, after decades of debate. DeLeo is personally pressing members to back his legislation, cognizant that the House, led by Salvatore F. DiMasi, voted 108-to-46 to kill Governor Deval Patrick's bill to license three casinos in 2008.

Representative Sean P. Garballey, a 25-year-old Arlington Democrat who declined to state his position on the current bill, said DeLeo personally lobbied him at the State House last week.

"He definitely conveyed his strong support for the bill," Garballey said, declining to elaborate.

"Anybody who's got a pulse in the building pretty much knows it's an important bill for the speaker, and you don't have to be spoken to to know that," said Representative Denis E. Guyer, a Dalton Democrat who opposes the legislation. "It impacts his district, and it's important to him."

DeLeo, a Winthrop Democrat who rose to power as a low-key figure promising to allow dissent, said he is doing what needs to be done to pass his bill.

"I wouldn't consider it arm-twisting," he said. "We debate, and there's give-and-take, until we come to a conclusion at the end."

He must persuade not only House members, but Patrick and Senate President Therese Murray, who support casinos but not slots at the tracks, which they argue will not create many new jobs. DeLeo acknowledges most of the jobs created will be at casinos, but says slots are essential to protecting the 670 workers at the struggling tracks.

"I just feel like they're sort of the forgotten people in this whole argument," DeLeo said. "I've been with them. I've spoken to them. They're my friends, and that's what I'm concerned about."

Indeed, the gambling debate has always been deeply personal for DeLeo, who not only grew up around the tracks, but whose district includes both Suffolk and Wonderland Greyhound Park. Track workers, he said, celebrated his election to the House in 1990 "like one of their own getting elected." The workers, he says, are "not dispensable."

"As a youngster, my dad would take me up there, see the horses, and as we would walk around, we'd see a lot of people," DeLeo said. "And some of the people didn't have the most glamorous jobs in the world, but I saw firsthand what these jobs meant to them, and that's why I get a little bit annoyed, shall we say, when people say, 'Well, it's only 674 jobs.'"

In Revere and East Boston, he said, track workers stop him and tell him they knew his father. Al DeLeo started working at Suffolk in the 1950s, as a part-time floor captain in the restaurant, while he was also head waiter at the Terrace Room at the Statler Hotel. In 1992, he became full-time maitre d' at the Turf Club, where he worked until his death at age 84 in 2003.

Sports stars, politicians - Al DeLeo knew them all, and could be trusted to keep secret who had come that day to play the ponies.

"He would honor anybody's confidentiality," said Dan Bucci, an assistant manager at the track in the 1980s. "He literally was an institution. He was a really unique race-tracker. And you'd have to have some experience on the racetrack to really appreciate a guy like that."

The kitchen staff, horse trainers, and parimutuel clerks adored him, and so did the gamblers, said Joseph Vella, who has tended bar at Suffolk since 1992.

"As soon as they walked in, they asked for Al," Vella said. "You can't get a better guy."

Robert DeLeo said he sees no conflict between his father's warning years ago to avoid gambling and his own current push for slots and casinos. He said he is frustrated by critics who say his bill will prey on the vulnerable. A lot of regular gamblers, DeLeo said, are just "old-timers" with \$10 or \$20 to spare.

"I see them with their stogies, spending the afternoon at Suffolk," he said. "It's like a senior-center mentality - you know, just get out there, have some fun, socialize, see their buddies, gab about the Red Sox while they're there. So I think there's more to it than has been portrayed."

But above all, he said, he is pushing his bill for the track workers, people like his father, who he said are struggling to support their families.

"I see the desperation in their eyes," DeLeo said. "And they don't know where their next paycheck is going to come from. I think I understand a little better than the average person."

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