

High school football betting rankles Pennsylvania athletic officials

By [Jason Cato](#), PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE-REVIEW

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North Allegheny High pounded the ball across the goal line for two late scores and stretched its dominance over Shaler to 25 wins in the past 26 meetings. People in some circles, though, considered the 17-point victory a loss.

A group of gambling websites in Costa Rica offers betting odds on high school football games, a practice that worries athletic officials in Pennsylvania, where it's illegal to place any sports bet. The online bookmakers tagged North Allegheny as a 25-point favorite in the Oct. 21 matchup against Shaler, a line that moved to 28 points by kickoff. North Allegheny won, 34-17.

"I'll tell you one good thing. We covered the spread," joked Paul Holzshu, Shaler's athletic director.

That did not salve the sting of another loss in the one-sided rivalry or Holzshu's disgust for sites such as [5Dimes.com](#) and bookies who offer betting opportunities on games teenagers play.

"It sounds to me like we are at the mercy of people who don't give a damn about the educational quality of what we're doing," Holzshu said. "They're just trying to make a buck off kids who are innocent. People are exploiting kids by betting on games."

Tony Williams, who founded 5Dimes in 1997, said he offers the lines because customers demand them.

"The customers who bet the games don't have a problem with morality. If the customers are happy, I am happy," Williams said. "Walk to any street corner in the United Kingdom. You can bet on under 16-year-old soccer events, boys or girls. Any match, just about any amount."

"The youth World Cup events are shown globally on television. What is the difference (between) betting on 15- and 16-year-old girls playing soccer or 17- and 18-year-old boys playing American football?"

5Dimes and its sister sites choose games that are televised, such as the North Allegheny-Shaler game, which aired on Root Sports. Customers request televised games, Williams said.

"If it wasn't on TV, it wouldn't be requested," he said. "If it wasn't requested, it would not be made available."

On Labor Day weekend, 5Dimes listed Central Catholic as 3 1/2-point underdogs to Archbishop Wood of suburban Philadelphia in a nationally televised game on ESPN2. Central Catholic won, 20-17.

This week, Sportsbet.com and IslandCasino.com, affiliate sites of 5Dimes, favored Upper St. Clair by 21 1/2 points over rival Mt. Lebanon. On Friday night, Root Sports broadcast the game, which Upper St. Clair won, 42-6.

"It's a little bit ridiculous," said Upper St. Clair senior quarterback/linebacker Dakota Conwell, who has committed to play at the University of Pittsburgh next year, "but if someone takes time out of their day to bet on us, I'm not going to blame them.

"To us, it's not going to make a difference. We're just here to play."

Bookmakers create lines using power charts and scoring history, Williams said. They cap betting limits at \$250 per game.

5Dimes has accepted high school bets since at least 2007. Williams said other sites offered betting on youth events before he began doing so.

He won't reveal how many bets people place each week or how much money changes hands.

Yet, he acknowledged, people place bets on professional golf matches to create "five times the action on a meaningless LPGA event than on a high school game."

Any amount of betting on high school games is too much for Bob Bozzuto, North Allegheny's athletic director.

"One dollar, one cent on a high school sport is wrong," he said. "High school sports are something that should be pure."

Tim O'Malley, executive director of the Western Pennsylvania Interscholastic Athletic League, agrees.

"You've got to be kidding me that people would bet high school games," he said. "It's borderline ridiculous."

Officials with the Pennsylvania Interscholastic Athletic Association investigated whether to take legal action against online bookmakers this season, according to Executive Director Bradley Cashman, but PIAA lawyers determined that they could not do anything.

"We cannot touch these offshore casinos," Cashman said. "I wish we could stop it, but we can't."

Although such wagers violate the federal Wire Wager Act, which makes it illegal to gamble over the Internet, authorities do little to stop it, said I. Nelson Rose, a professor at Whittier Law School in Southern California who operates the "Gambling and the Law" blog.

The FBI this year cracked down on three of the largest online poker sites: FullTilt, PokerStars and AbsolutePoker. Federal prosecutors in New York filed criminal charges against the operators and are seeking to recover \$3 billion they consider ill-gotten gains.

In 2009, a federal judge in St. Louis sentenced the operator of BetOnSports.com to prison for his guilty plea to racketeering charges and ordered him to forfeit nearly \$44 million.

BetOnSports.com once was one of the world's largest gambling sites and operated out of Costa Rica.

"Betting on high school games probably is not legal anywhere," Rose said. "I think that is extremely dangerous for a legitimate industry. You don't want high school kids to get involved in trying to beat the spread instead of winning the game."

No legalized gambling in the United States allows bets on high school games.

Delaware allows only multigame bets on professional sports. The Nevada Gaming Commission allows single-game bets on pro and college sports but prohibits bets on high school games or noncollegiate athletic events.

Even if laws permitted such betting, some people doubt that legal bookmakers, such as those in Las Vegas, would be interested because of the difficulty in accurately projecting a line on high school games and the limited action it likely would draw.

"Booking high school opens a can of worms I don't think anyone in this town is interested in," said Todd Fuhrman, a senior sportsbook analyst for Caesars Entertainment in Las Vegas. "You try to adhere to as much integrity as you can. And when it comes to high school sports, it's not something I see us getting involved with."

Yet offering action on high school games pays off for offshore casinos as a form of advertising, said Marco D'Angelo, a Leechburg native who is general manager of picks for Pregame.com, a Las Vegas sports betting information site that sells picks but does not accept or place bets.

"The reason they do this is they get more bang for the buck through word of mouth," said D'Angelo, who noted that such sites often offer odds on courtesy bets for everything from the Little League World Series to the popular singing competition "American Idol."

"It's worth it to them, even if they get beat," he said. "Let's face it, they don't know squat about high school football."