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Man behind sports betting ban stands his ground

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The lone referendum on the Nov. 8 New Jersey ballot asks residents statewide whether to approve the legalization of sports betting at the state's casinos and racetracks.



But even if the non-binding ballot measure passes, state officials still will be unable to offer such gambling because a federal law — sponsored by former U.S. Sen. Bill Bradley of New Jersey —

forbids it. As a result, sports betting would be legal only if that law is overturned by federal courts or Congress decides to change it.

Bradley's bill, called the Professional Amateur Sports Protection Act of 1992, banned gambling in all 50 states, with a few exceptions, such as horse racing, greyhound racing and jai alai. Four states — Nevada, Delaware, Oregon, and Montana — were allowed to continue other gambling that they already offered. Now, only Nevada offers extensive sports betting on professional and college sports, which is the model that New Jersey sports-betting supporters want.

Nearly two decades later, Bradley says he'd do it all over again.

"Nothing has changed my view of sports betting," Bradley said. "Everything is still the same — Atlantic City thinking that sports betting is a panacea for their problems. But they have a bigger issue there, which is making the city into a destination for tourists."

Bradley's antipathy toward sports betting is personal as well as philosophical. The former Princeton basketball star went on to spend 10 seasons with the Knicks, playing a key role in the Knicks' two National Basketball Association championship teams and being inducted into the Basketball Hall of Fame in 1982.

One game at Madison Square Garden early in Bradley's pro career disturbed him, however.

"We were ahead by five points or so, the opponent hit a basket to cut the lead to three points, and I heard cheering," Bradley said of the seemingly meaningless basket as the game was ending. "I asked why, and someone said they were cheering because [the other team] covered the point spread."

The incident deeply offended Bradley, now 68.

"I know that when I was a player, I certainly didn't like the idea of being a roulette chip," said Bradley, who added that he appeared in commercials opposing a 1974 referendum that would have permitted casino gambling statewide. "Yet, I knew that view wasn't making me too popular in Atlantic City."

Bradley said his initial push was for a complete national ban until that proved politically impractical.

"But four states already had the betting, and the sentiment was that rather than battle with eight senators fighting you, we'd just do it with the 46 that remained," Bradley said.

In 1978, New Jersey followed Nevada's lead in permitting casinos, though only in Atlantic City. Unlike any other state, the law granted New Jersey a window under which it had until the end of 1993 to gain statewide voter approval of sports betting. Efforts in 1992 and 1993 to place the issue on the statewide ballot passed in the state Senate but died in an Assembly committee.

Alan Marcus and Thomas O'Neil were lobbyists for the NBA at that time, working to keep the issue from getting on the ballot. Marcus, who still works with O'Neil at the Marcus Group public relations firm and is an adviser to [Bergen County](#) Executive Kathleen Donovan, called the campaign "the most exciting one I've had in 40 years" because of the intense lobbying by the Atlantic City casinos supporting the measures.

"The polling data at the time showed that we could win," O'Neil said, referring to polls that found a majority of voters statewide opposed to sports betting. "But the fear was that if the casinos outspent us 10 or 20 to 1, they would have a chance."

The tug of war over whether the measure would reach the voting booth left scars, Marcus said.

"I never saw an issue get as personal as that one did," he said. "A lot of people stopped talking to each other that year. Some people have never gotten over it."