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Monica Yant Kinney: Pa. competing with Mob bookies

By Monica Yant Kinney

Inquirer Columnist

When Pennsylvania officials launched a state lottery in 1972, optimistic bureaucrats predicted the end of the illegal numbers racket.

Five years later, the state debuted a 7 p.m. "Daily Number" game eerily similar to the tavern and barbershop action preferred by those not wishing to involve the government in their gambling. Twenty years after that, in 1997, lottery officials trumpeted an exciting new promotion: a *second* Daily Number drawing . . . in the afternoon.

"The state was trying to compete with bookies!" snorts a South Philly gambler who lost huge sums on the street. "The lottery came out with that day number to fight the Mob."

Today, good guys and goodfellas continue to torment each other over the almighty gambling dollar as suckers continue to lose their shirts trying to get rich quick.

Anyone diving into the latest criminal case against the Philadelphia Mob expecting made-for-TV gore will be sorely disappointed. As my colleague, veteran Mob watcher George Anastasia, warns, "It's an economic indictment."

Joseph "Uncle Joe" Ligambi and 12 other alleged members of what's left of the Philadelphia Mafia are not charged with shooting, dismembering, or blowing up anybody. The feds couldn't catch them busting a single kneecap.

Instead, this indictment - superseding, if only mildly seedy - chronicles the Mob's workmanlike obsession with accounts payable and receivable. Sort of like *The Office*, but with no cold calls.

Consider the dilemma of Anthony "Ant" Staino Jr., caught on a wiretap fuming at a loan-sharking customer who inexplicably lent Staino's money to another deadbeat.

"Talk to this kid," Staino barked. "He made his money. Everybody's making money, and I can't get mine."

Wheel of fortune

In 1986, Thomas "Tommy Del" DelGiorno became the highest-ranking Philly mobster ever to cooperate with authorities. Much of what he revealed concerned La Cosa Nostra's economic evolution.

"Gambling," DelGiorno explained, "is the wheel that makes everything go round."

Bookmaking begot extortion, since the only thing worse than not getting a guy's bet is hearing that someone else did.

Bookmaking also begot loan-sharking, since degenerate gamblers are so sure they're going to hit big on their next bet, they'll happily pay 150 percent interest for a wad of cash to stay in the game.

Old-timers prefer the ponies, but the modern Mafia went all-in on electronic wagering long before Act 71 legalized slots in this state.

According to the indictment, Ligambi, Joseph "Mousie" Massimino, and Staino formed a company to front an illegal poker machine business that netted them as much as \$1,000 per week per box. Other Mob soldiers giddily followed suit, supposedly placing the low-maintenance, high-profit devices in bars with names like Cholly Bears and the First Ward Republican Club.

Diving for dollars

My mob-and-gambling tutor read the indictment and laughed quietly to himself, lest any of the guys from the neighborhood hear.

"To me, this isn't news."

But, I argue, isn't it fascinating that in 2011, with 10 casinos across Pennsylvania operating 24 hours a day, government officials still crave a bigger cut of the action? In less than five years, legalized gambling has already generated more than \$5 billion in taxes and license fees.

Philadelphia, the largest city in America to host a casino, saw SugarHouse players pump \$14 million into slot machines and drop \$6 million at table games in April alone. Imagine how much more dough people would blow at that neon dive down on the Delaware if they couldn't do it at the corner bar?

The gambler laughs again at the absurdity of government partnering with a predatory, but legal, enterprise while trying to snuff out comparatively passive illegal foes.

"Bookies don't prey on gamblers," he reminds. "Bookies don't solicit. Gamblers find them."