

# BEHIND THE BETS

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## Will an intrepid governor shake up sports betting ... and politics?

By Chad Millman



Coming to a Delaware gas station near you?

A prediction: Sometime soon—after **Tim Tebow** brings peace to the Middle East but before the Lions become contenders—you'll walk into your local deli and bet on sports. You won't get pinched. You won't go on the lam if you can't pay up. Seriously. It's a lock.

For this, you may have **Jack Markell** to thank. **Which is funny because Markell, Delaware's governor-elect, is not a betting man. Hasn't been to Vegas in 15 years, can't remember ever playing one of his state's slot machines, never gambles on football or basketball.**

**And yet, soon after he's sworn in on January 20th, there's a chance he'll start an avalanche of unprecedented gambling reform, and become the betting man's biggest hero since Charles McNeil invented the point spread.**

That's because Markell has a problem that needs solving, pronto. The brainy kid who went to Delaware's Newark High, married his high school sweetheart, got an MBA from the University

of Chicago and spent 10 years as his native state's treasurer finally has his dream job. Only it comes with a \$3.35 billion budget that is, oh, about \$600 million short. "Right now," the Governor-elect says, "we've got to get our fiscal house in order."

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One way he may do that? Approve sports betting in his state. "You look for places where you can differentiate yourself," says Markell. "And Delaware can consider sports gaming."

Back in 1992, when Congress banned state governments from being in the bookmaking biz, it exempted four that already allowed sports betting: Nevada, Montana, Oregon and Delaware. Oregon's run began in 1989 and was handled by the state lottery, which sold parlay tickets from \$2-\$20. But the state killed the program in 2007, hoping to attract more NCAA events. Montana legalized a sports lottery in 1973, and this past NFL season started a weekly fantasy betting game that costs between \$5 and \$100.

Delaware toyed with a sports lottery in the 1970s, too, but quickly bailed. Turns out the state bookmakers weren't very good. Still, its law stayed on the books and last year, with the economy in a freefall, a bill to reintroduce sports betting passed through the Delaware House. Then it died in a senate committee when the outgoing governor said she'd put the kibosh on it. But, on the campaign trail, Markell said he was open to the idea.

Now that he's the boss I called to ask, what's up? He called me back—just him by the way, no aide telling me to standby for the Governor-elect—and he said all the smart things: He still has to do a lot of research. He wants to hear from proponents and opponents. He won't do it if the costs outweigh the benefits. But, he says, "I'm not philosophically opposed to it. We've already got gaming in the state and you can't be a little big pregnant. There will be a lot of interest in this idea fairly soon."

And not just in Delaware. Consider this: When Congress banned states from booking sports 17 years ago, gambling of any kind was legal in just a handful of places. Now, it's allowed in 37 states. That includes Connecticut, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania and West Virginia, all of which border Delaware or are a daytrip away. Markell's decision—and I'm betting NFL parlays are the rage from Dewey Beach to Wilmington by next season—will have his neighbors scrambling to keep up. With an estimated \$5 billion bet on sports online every year, all that headed out of the country, you think any of them want to lose business to, and look less progressive than, a state the size of a thumbprint? Please.

But here's the rub: The only way these states can play Delaware's game is by getting the 1992 betting ban overturned. This is gonna take muscle. Which means it's time to call in the boys from Jersey. They're itching for a fight. Shocker.



Markell.org

On the trail.

Gambling options on the Eastern seaboard and on the Internet have been eroding Atlantic City's profits since Sinatra headlined the Sands. Now Delaware—a roll of the dice away from AC—may allow sports betting? When the boardwalk is empty on Super Bowl Sunday? That's just too much.

For months Jersey's state legislature has been leaning on its U.S. congressmen to challenge the ban. This past December, the state assembly passed a resolution making its opposition official. It sends a message, but has as much teeth as a newborn. "Really," says N.J. State Senator **Raymond Lesniak**, "we have no chance of getting it overturned in Congress."

In American politics sports betting is the third rail of vices. And the leagues lobby hard to oppose it, whether the state has a pro team or not. So, in late February, Lesniak says he's gonna kick the federal government in the shins, filing a lawsuit that claims the 1992 Professional and Amateur Sports Protection Act is discriminatory and unconstitutional. "When they banned sports betting we were living in a different world," says Lesniak, who pays the bills as a lawyer. "Now it's legal where there are other gambling options as well, it should be legal here."

And this is how change is started. It's a pragmatic governor getting smart about a budget crisis; a bunch of states trying to compete with him; an aggrieved state senator filing a lawsuit.

And, guarantee, one day, this is how it will end: You'll walk into a deli and order a small coffee, a donut, the Chargers plus-six and a pack of gum.

Hold the cuffs.

