

Boston Globe

DraftKings quietly rolls out addictive gambling prevention option

The fantasy sports company has instituted a system familiar to legal gambling operations.

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As it fends off comparisons to illegal gambling operations, Boston-based daily fantasy sports company DraftKings now offers a system familiar to many legal gambling businesses: a self-exclusion option, which allows users to deactivate their accounts for periods ranging from three months to five years.

On a new responsible gaming section of its website, DraftKings presents the self-exclusion policy as a way to prevent addictive gaming.

“If, at any point, you think you’re spending too much time or money on DraftKings, you have the option of self-exclusion to take a break,” the page reads. It then provides a link allowing users to block access to their own accounts.

DraftKings said in a statement that self-exclusion is not new to the company and customer service employees have “been armed with it for a while now.” But the site now allows users to block themselves without reaching out to DraftKings customer service.

Several DraftKings users told Boston.com they did not see the feature before last weekend. The link to the responsible gaming section was not listed on the site as recently as last Wednesday, according to the Internet Archive.

DraftKings has resisted gambling comparisons in the U.S., arguing its games are valid under federal and most states’ gaming laws. But self-exclusion is common in the gambling industry, and its usage appears to be an acknowledgment by DraftKings that its users could be susceptible to the same kind of addictive play.

“Last week we rolled out an updated version of our existing policies in order to maximize the integrity of our product and the protection of our players,” DraftKings said in a statement. “We are committed to ensuring our industry operates in a manner that is completely transparent and fair for all consumers so that they can continue to play the games they love.”

In Massachusetts, the law that legalized casinos required a self-exclusion option. Those who enroll are not able to access casinos for the period of the self-exclusion, and if they do,

winnings are forfeited, according to a Massachusetts Gaming Commission press release earlier this year. Last month, gaming commissioner Enrique Zuniga mentioned potential addictive gambling issues as an area of concern as the commission considers recommended rules for daily fantasy sports.

Much of the debate over DraftKings and other daily fantasy sports websites has focused on the legality of the games under state and federal laws. Most recently, New York Attorney General Eric Schneiderman said DraftKings and competitor FanDuel violate state gaming laws and ordered them to stop accepting bets from within the state.

Other issues have also been raised this fall, however, such as whether the companies use proper protocols to address addictive and underage gaming.

Les Bernal, the national director of the Washington, D.C.-based organization Stop Predatory Gambling, dismissed self-exclusion options as a “sham.”

“The whole idea of somebody who’s an addict is the absence of free will. How does somebody who’s an addict exercise their free will?” Bernal said. “It’s a gimmick that’s not meant to protect the player. It’s meant to give the appearance of concern by Internet gambling companies like DraftKings.”

DraftKings’s responsible gaming section also directs users to the National Center for Responsible Gaming, saying the center “provides a variety of support and referral sources for help with counseling and crisis support for any affected by a gaming-related issue.” And the company suggests parents install parental control software to prevent underage users from accessing the website.

DraftKings’s chief competitor, FanDuel, does not appear to have a similar section on its website. FanDuel did not respond to requests for comment.

Self-exclusion can be helpful to gambling addicts who have already recognized they have a problem, but it does little to help those who have not reached that point of self-awareness, said Krystle Kelly, the director of development and communications at the Massachusetts Council on Compulsive Gambling.

“As a standalone, if that’s the only thing they’re doing to acknowledge this could be a gambling problem, I don’t think this is going to be very effective,” Kelly said. “If all of this negative attention did create these controls, I think that’s a good thing. I think that’s a step in the right direction. But I think there probably needs to be more work done to address high-risk populations.”

Daily fantasy sports advertisements, for example, should not focus so much on potential winnings and “promise the farm,” she said.

“That’s a really risky thing to do with gambling populations,” Kelly said.