

INSIDER'S PRESEPECTIVE: MIKE FRANZESE

**INTERVIEW BY JASON W. LEE, PHD, UNIVERSITY OF NORTH FLORIDA
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Lee: Mr. Franzese, thank you very much for taking time out of your busy schedule to share your insight on the important issues of sports gambling and the role organized crime in sports gambling. You have a fascinating story. Can you tell us a bit about your background and how you got into organized crime?

Franzese: My dad was the underboss of the Colombo Crime family in the 1960s. When he received a 50 year prison sentence in 1967, I was a pre-med student in college when he went off to do his time in 1970 in Leavenworth Penitentiary. My life changed. I left school. My dad proposed me for membership in the Colombo Family and I was inducted in 1975.

Lee: How high did you rise within the Colombo family (and what did that entail)?

Franzese: I rose in the life by being a good soldier, understanding the politics of the mob life and by making a very significant amount of money. I was appointed a caporegime (captain) in 1980 by the Boss.

Lee: How were you able to get out?

Franzese: Long story here. Combination of knowing the life intimately well, never testifying against my former mob associates and by outlasting almost everyone I knew in the life who is either dead or in prison for life. And, because Jesus Christ had my back! That's the main reason. God had another plan and purpose for my life.

Lee: What safety concerns do you have today?

Franzese: Very few. I don't challenge the guys. I can't go back to Brooklyn to live, but I'm not in fear.

Lee: Why is sports gambling so attractive to organized crime operations?

Franzese: Most mobsters love to gamble and love the business of gambling. The concept of risking a little to make a lot is very appealing. Also, mobsters know gambling is a weakness they can exploit in others.

Lee: What other organized crime groups are heavily associated with sports gambling?

Franzese: I had personal experience with the Russian mob's involvement in illegal gambling. I also know the Russian mob looks to extort Russian athletes into compromising the outcome of games in which they participate to gain an edge in their gambling operations. La Cosa Nostra does the same, with any athlete they can reach.

Lee: How significant was sport gambling to your overall business operations?

Franzese: Very significant to the overall operation of the mob. Fairly significant to my own operations. I was generating millions of dollars per week in the gasoline business. Nothing compared to that in terms of my overall earnings during that time.

Lee: How does that compare to the status of the profitability of sport gambling today?

Franzese: I can assure you, there is more money in it today for the mob than during my day, only because of the significant increase in gambling opportunities through the Internet, casinos, and video poker machines.

Lee: What other criminal activities are tied to sport gambling (and which of these are of greatest concern)?

Franzese: Extortion and loan sharking are other illegal business activities the mob engages in as a result of its illegal gambling operations.

Lee: For those not familiar with your work, could you detail what you do, as well some of the organizations, sport and otherwise, that you have worked with and/or been invited to speak to?

Franzese: Regarding my work with gambling, my objective is to inform and educate athletes and other personnel involved in sports on both the professional and college levels as to the dangers gambling can pose to them personally as well as to the integrity of the sport in which they compete. I currently work regularly with the NBA (National Basketball Association), MLB (Major League Baseball), NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association) Division I, II, and III Universities around the country, ATP (Association of Tennis professionals), AFCA (Association of Football Coaches of America), and many high schools nationally.

Lee: What does a typical month look like for you, in regards to travel and appearances?

Franzese: Travelling 2-3 weeks per month. Several appearances all over the country. Writing articles; involved in TV and film productions.

Lee: Explain why such organizations are so interested in having you come in and speak to their athletes?

Franzese: To prevent an athlete, coach, official, or anyone associated with their sport to engage in gambling activity or associate with anyone involved in gambling that might cause them to compromise the integrity of their sport.

Lee: In your opinion, how substantial is America's gambling problem-how does sports gambling stack up to the overall issue gambling in the U.S.?

Franzese: Very substantial and growing rapidly thanks to the Internet, poker on TV, the proliferation of casinos throughout the country. There is an undercurrent of gambling issues people are experiencing in America, as well as throughout the world. Sports gambling is on par with every other form of gambling. Very popular.

Lee: Outside of Nevada, what are the sports gambling hotbeds in the U.S.?

Franzese: Until recently sports gambling was only legal in Las Vegas. As of now, it is the only "hotbed" area for sports gambling in the U.S. However, the Internet picks up the slack across the country, even though gambling on sports is illegal, unlicensed and unregulated on the Internet.

Lee: Do you feel that society takes too lenient of a view on the issue of illegal sport gambling?

Franzese: Yes. They just don't get it unless they get bit by it.

Lee: How prevalent is gambling among athletes on the collegiate level?

Franzese: Very prevalent. Not only among athletes, but among college students in general. Especially on the Internet.

Lee: How does this compare to gambling involvement by professional athletes?

Franzese: The pros are more involved in my experience because they have the money, obviously. Gambling is an extension of their competitive nature.

Lee: Do you see any reason for hope that the status of illegal sports gambling will be able to improve (Why?/Why not?)?

Franzese: No. I see it growing. We now live in a global gambling community. Illegal sports gambling will continue to grow along with the growth of legal gambling. They go hand in hand.

Lee: Do you have any final parting words or advice for our readers?

Franzese: I am not an anti-gambling proponent across the board. My goal is merely to educate and inform people that gambling in its many forms can be dangerous. It can be just as addicting as alcohol or drugs. For those with an addictive or compulsive personality, its "pick your poison," drugs, alcohol, pornography...gambling. I see no harm in social gambling that does not impact your behavior, or your bank account in a negative way. Unfortunately, I have seen COUNTLESS LIVES destroyed from gambling abuse. Families, friends and business associates of the gambler included.

Young, old, black or white. Doesn't matter. Gambling abuse can be an equal opportunity destroyer. It can creep up on you and get you hooked before you realize what's happening. My advice to those who engage in gambling in any form is to know your limits, understand your own personality and BE CAREFUL!