

EDITORIAL

New York's big bet

BY THE EDITORIAL BOARD

When the Supreme Court struck down a 1992 federal law that had banned most sports gambling in every state but Nevada last week, legalization of such wagering in New York became a mortal lock.

That's sports betting lingo for a sure thing.

The anti-gambling ship hasn't just sailed in New York, it sank when voters supported a referendum by 14 percentage points to expand casino gambling in 2013.

This change has sprung partly from a broad wave of acceptance for what some may still consider vice here, but also as a reaction to legislation in neighboring states.

The biggest impetus for the 2013 vote was the outflow of gambling profits across state lines. The situation will quickly be the same with sports betting. New Jersey — whose lawsuit resulted in the reversal of the federal sports gambling ban — will offer such betting within weeks. Pennsylvania and Connecticut are also moving quickly. That rationale is even improving the odds of marijuana legalization, as neighboring states approve sale for recreational use.

The evolution away from unpopular bans on such pursuits is liberating, but also worrisome. There are good reasons vice has traditionally been outlawed. But continuing to maintain a criminalization of behaviors that now are readily accessible and rarely lead to penalties is hypocritical. Legalization allows regulation and taxation of such pursuits.

Bringing sports betting out of the shadows will be a big change, but not because such action isn't available now. It is. Many illegal bookmakers in New York offer a fantastic array of wagering opportunities to their clients, mostly

The first action on legal sports gambling is in Albany, where lawmakers must lay down smart regulations while winning benefits for the public

online. Bets large and small can be placed on everything from who will win a boxing match or a professional or college football game to much more complex propositions on pursuits as niche as darts and virtual esports. Odds are available for every imaginable bet, including real-time wagers on what will happen during the next at-bat or field-goal attempt.

What will change with legalization is the level of acceptance, attention, commentary, programming and advertising. And the number of people who enjoy its charms and suffer its pitfalls is sure to grow.

Britain, with a sports-mad society like that in the United States, and its long tradition of legal gambling, is a good model for what to expect here. Sports teams and leagues in England are often sponsored by bookmakers, with their garish logos dominating uniforms and aggressive gambling ads dominating programming. There are betting kiosks at arenas and stadiums, and live action on smartphones. That proximity and promotion lead more people to gamble and to do it more often than when it is illegal. Addictions increase, bills go unpaid and lives are destroyed.

Sports and fandom themselves also change. It's difficult and unusual to get highly paid players in the most popular sports to lose on purpose, but the same cannot be said for the lower levels of less popular sports like pro tennis, for instance, or many college sports. Some of those players can be tempted, and on-field officials can be, too. More and different wager-

ing will also change how we cheer for athletes, just as fantasy sports already have. Interest and viewership in sports will increase, and leagues will increasingly prosper, but only if they can maintain integrity.

The question now is how to move forward with sports gambling in a way that minimizes harm and maximizes benefit. While the states will and should have the most regulatory power, there is ample room for federal law to set a national baseline. Sports leagues already have monitoring programs and rules in place to prevent cheating, but those efforts will need to be increased, with the money for enforcement coming from the gambling profits.

A ban on betting on college sports appears unlikely, but

national betting limits as low as \$1,000 for those amateur games would discourage fixing. Problem gamblers should be able to bar themselves from placing sports bets, a system that has helped compulsive gamblers stay out of casinos. For these measures to be effective the rules would have to apply nationwide.

In Albany, bills are expected to be introduced this week that will codify sports gambling and its taxation and regulation. The smart money is on broad availability of wagering at physical locations and online. But minors

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should be prevented from playing. Money must be set aside for prevention and treatment of compulsive gambling. And revenue collected should be channeled into a specific public pot that can be easily tracked and understood, not siphoned off into the gaping maws of patronage-pit off-track betting authorities.

Criminalized sports betting has become a losing proposition. Now New York has to play responsibly to assure that legalizing sports betting will pay off.

