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Online gambling thrives despite law

BY AMAN BATHEJA
STAR-TELEGRAM STAFF WRITER

Gambling Web sites like to attract customers, not controversy.

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But the Costa Rica-based 5Dimes.com got both last month when it began taking bets on this week's football game between Southlake Carroll and Miami Northwestern.

It wasn't the first high school game on which the site had taken bets, but it inspired national outrage (on the bright side for Carroll fans, the Dragons were favored by eight points). The company quickly stopped bets on all high school games.

The uproar made clear that online gambling is still thriving in the U.S., nearly a year after a federal ban was enacted.

"There's plenty of action," said David Conlan, an avid online poker player in Garland. "Just as much as there always was."

The Unlawful Internet Gambling Enforcement Act, which President Bush signed in October, blocks financial institutions from transferring money to gambling sites. It is supposed to keep Americans from using their credit cards to fund accounts on popular betting sites.

Many gamblers have found workarounds.

"I don't see it's had any serious impact on online gambling with one exception," said James Kelly, a business law professor at SUNY College at Buffalo and co-editor of *Gaming Law Review*. "It's forced the publicly traded companies to be very wary of taking any American customers."

Many U.S. gamblers skirt the restrictions by giving their money to a third-party site that then transfers it to the gambling site.

Walter Jones, a spokesman with 5Dimes.com, said he's seen relatively little impact from the gambling restrictions.

Conlan has continued to ante up on partypoker.com by signing up for a Canadian credit card. The site offers a link to that option.

Adding to the controversy is a ruling by the World Trade Organization that the U.S. law violates international trade agreements.

The ruling stems from a complaint by Antigua, a tiny Caribbean island where dozens of gambling sites are based. The island, represented by El Paso lawyer Mark Mendel, argues that U.S. policy on the issue is hypocritical because it allows some horse-racing bets to be placed online.

The WTO has told the U.S. that it must open the country to offshore gambling sites or completely ban all forms of online wagering.

At least four bills now in Congress would legalize gambling and subject it to regulations and taxes.

Anti-gambling groups are fighting the bills, and pro-gambling groups are supporting them.

It remains unclear what kind of gambling, if any, is legal for a U.S. consumer on Web sites based in other countries.

"The Justice Department says everything is illegal," Kelly said. "Experts say sports betting is definitely illegal and everything else is in a shade of gray."

Aman Batheja, 817-390-7695
abatheja@star-telegram.com

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