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FORMER SENATOR BATTLES BET BAN

D'Amato lobbying to allow Internet gambling

By TONY BATT
STEPHENS WASHINGTON BUREAU



Alfonse D'Amato
Former senator says
Congress may have to lift
betting ban

WASHINGTON -- It wasn't difficult for former Sen. Alfonse D'Amato to decide last month to lobby for the Poker Players Alliance as it seeks to repeal an Internet gambling ban.

"I've known some of the people at PPA and some, I actually played with. They knew of my enthusiasm for the game," D'Amato said in a phone interview from New York City.

During D'Amato's 18 years in the Senate, the New York Republican was known for having Thursday night poker games in his Capitol Hill office, and he still plays weekly.

After the House returns from a two-week recess on April 17, Rep. Barney Frank, D-Mass., chairman of the House Financial Services Committee, is expected to introduce legislation to repeal an Internet gambling ban approved by Congress last year.

Reps. Shelley Berkley, D-Nev., and Jon Porter, R-Nev., also plan to unveil a bill calling for an 18-month study of Internet gambling by the National Academy of Sciences.

D'Amato, 69, said he is working with Frank and the Nevadans, but it still isn't clear how many bills will be introduced or when.

"We are not going to get into the pride of authorship," D'Amato said. "We're just working to produce legislative remedies."

Poker players are being discriminated against by the ban, which does not prohibit state lotteries, fantasy sports or horse racing bets, D'Amato said. He describes the ban as an "unreasonable constraint" on the rights of individuals to use the Internet.

"Are we saying you have a right to own a gun in your own house, but you can't use your computer to play poker on the Internet? It's ridiculous," D'Amato said.

The ban makes it a crime to use credit cards or online financial devices to pay for casino games and sports betting on the Internet.

Even though former Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, R-Tenn., had to attach the ban to a port security bill in the waning days of Congress last year to get it passed. Repealing it will not be easy.

Roll call votes to ban Internet gambling were 317-93 in the House last July and 90-10 in the Senate eight years earlier.

The National Football League strongly supports the ban, and NFL Executive Vice President Joe Browne said Internet gambling is contrary to federal and state statutes.

"The spirit of Congress, going back for decades, has always been against gambling on college and professional sports," Browne said.

As for D'Amato, Browne said, "he has always been a good spokesman for whatever cause he represents and he has been on the opposite side of professional sports on several occasions."

D'Amato said Congress may have no choice but to consider a repeal

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after the World Trade Organization last week declared the ban illegal.

The WTO ruled in favor of Antigua and Barbuda, a Caribbean nation that defied U.S. efforts to outlaw the \$12 billion Internet gambling industry. "I think, in the fullness of time, this (WTO decision) may be one of the linchpins in bringing about a change in the law," D'Amato said.

After returning from a recent trip to the Isle of Man, which is located near Britain and allows Internet gambling, D'Amato said he is convinced online wagering can be effectively regulated.

Asked if Internet gambling should be regulated and taxed, D'Amato said, "Absolutely."

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