

# **From Under a Rock: Organized Crime's Involvement in Florida Horseracing**

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Organized criminal activities in national sports spans geographic boundaries and time periods. This paper, based on part of the speaker's dissertation, "And They're Off!: The Development of the Horse Racing Industry in Florida", presents organized crime's historic involvement in bookmaking, wire services, track ownership, and horse ownership in Florida as a microcosmic example of the underside of the racing industry throughout the country. Included is a discussion of the key players, their effect on the sport, and efforts to remove them.

Horseracing, a major sport in the state of Florida, attracted organized crime which infiltrated the industry. One generally hears about race fixing but the more insidious infiltration comes through hidden ownership of racetracks where the longterm

access to a steady flow of money offers greater sustainable benefits than bribing a jockey to lose.

Since the 1980s, state laws and local ordinances prohibited most forms of games of chance but the laws did not stop people from gambling. By the early twentieth century, the largest profits realized from horseracing fell into the bookmakers' pockets. When Florida horseracing began to flourish in the 1920s, horseracing attracted thrill-seeking bootleggers -- including Owney Madden, Meyer Lansky, and William Vincent Dwyer -- not just for the sport but as an investment.

Corrupt and lax local law enforcement, and even the FBI's J. Edgar Hoover, turned a blind eye toward illegal bookmaking. As first the State Racing Commission then Senator Estes Kefauver's Special Committee to Investigate Organized Crime in Interstate Commerce in 1950 and 1951 began ferreting out organized crime's involvement with Florida's racing, even Governor Fuller Warren was politically damaged by campaign contributions from men with ties to organized crime.

Bookmaking declined in Florida with the spotlight on organized crime's activities, the anti-bookie wire law, and proliferation of dog tracks and jai alai with legal parimutuel betting. A 1974 study concluded that "the elements of hard core organized crime which did gain a foothold in racing ownership many years ago have virtually vanished. They have either been pushed out or have sold out."