

Greed guarantees specter of corruption in all sports

by Tim Sullivan

David Stern has embraced the single-whistle theory. The NBA commissioner wants to believe Tim Donaghy is a rogue referee who acted alone, or at least without the complicity of his basketball brethren.

Stern wants to believe Pandora's box has a bottom, that corruption can be contained, that the temptation to influence games for gambling interests can be blunted by endless scrutiny and eternal vigilance.

He wants to believe whatever Donaghy did was an "isolated" case. But he has to know better.

"The day we can stop worrying about guys shaving points," the late, great Al McGuire observed, "is the day after they make money obsolete."

Greed is still central to the human condition and legalized gambling is now as close as the corner store or the nearest computer. Our growing cultural tolerance for games of chance has effectively blurred the boundaries separating entertainment from vice and avocation from addiction. In an age when professional sports franchises freely forge sponsorship deals with casinos, and team logos appear on state lottery tickets, it does not require much of a logical leap to wonder whether the games those teams play are completely above-board.

To describe Tim Donaghy as an isolated case, then, is optimism bordering on naivete. Wherever there's a buck to be made, there will always be unscrupulous people in pursuit. Wherever basketball is played, aspiring fixers will never be far behind.

None of our major sports is more easily manipulated than basketball, and none can be influenced more subtly. One man's blocking foul is another man's charge, and no two men seem to agree on exactly what constitutes a traveling violation. So much of the sport is so subjective that a rogue ref might be able to corrupt the competition for years without arousing suspicion.

That, evidently, was the case with Donaghy, who was allotted five playoff games this spring and was described Tuesday by Stern as being "in the top tier of accuracy for on-court performance." If Donaghy was shaving points, he must have been using a scalpel.

Based simply on the stat sheet, Donaghy's most suspicious performance was probably Feb. 26, 2007, when the New York Knicks covered a four-point spread at home against the Miami Heat while shooting 39 of the

game's 47 free throws. Based simply on backlash, his most controversial calls were likely made during Game 3 of the Spurs-Suns playoff series.

Yet a referee need not consciously blow his whistle for one team's benefit to produce big payoffs for gamblers. Simply calling a game tightly, stopping the action frequently for free throws, can ensure the success of "over/under" speculators. According to Covers.com, a Web site that tracks referees and wagering considerations, Donaghy has led all NBA refs over the last two seasons in the frequency of his games in which at least one player fouled out (58 percent).

Another shred of arcane circumstantial evidence the Web site published is that the "over" went 10-2 in those games Donaghy officiated last season in which the over/under was set at 184 1/2 points or lower. Only one NBA official, Mike Smith, had a more lopsided record (13-2).

Though the specifics of Donaghy's alleged skulduggery have not yet been disclosed, and the extent of the conspiracy remains unknown, it's pretty revealing that the NBA was alerted to Donaghy's potential gambling problem as early as 2005 and failed to find confirmation from his work. For all of the league's sophisticated tripwires, including extensive background checks and personal asset and debt analyses, Stern said Donaghy's issues remained undetected until the FBI contacted the league June 20.

"This is the most serious situation and worst situation that I have ever experienced, either as a fan of the NBA, a lawyer for the NBA or commissioner of the NBA," Stern said. "We take our obligation to our fans in this situation very, very seriously.

"I pledge that we will do every look-back possible to analyze our processes and seek the best advice possible to ... continue to assure fans that we are doing the best we can possibly can."

Typically playful, sometimes smug, Stern seemed shaken and halting before the cameras Tuesday. He chose his words with unusual care so as not to undermine an ongoing investigation, but he lacked the eloquence and moral certitude former baseball Commissioner A. Bartlett Giamatti displayed during his 1989 press conference following the gambling-based banishment of Pete Rose.

Giamatti, a brilliant writer, had the advantage of prepared remarks. Stern, less formal, chose to speak extemporaneously. He looked like a man who was still absorbing a body blow, still more shocked than outraged, given to long pauses and rhetorical shrugs.

He did not seem to comprehend how susceptible his sport has been to sinister influences, nor how susceptible it remains.

Point-shaving has been a recurring scandal in college basketball since the 1950s. When it surfaced in the Atlantic Coast Conference in 1961, University of North Carolina Chancellor William Aycock recognized that it could never be completely eradicated.

"We were sure at the outset," Aycock said, "that the only way we could be certain there was no bribery and no scandals was to have no intercollegiate athletics."

That is, at least, until money is made obsolete.

Greed guarantees specter of corruption in all sports by Tim Sullivan