The WAGER, Vol. 8, Editorial, Caution – Bingo May Be Hazardous To Your Health

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The Legislature and Governor of the state of Washington recently passed a law warning us about the dangers of…

Muslim terrorists with box-cutters? No.

Anthrax on postage stamps? Guess again.

Global warming? West Nile Fever? AIDS? Nope.

The lawmakers have decided that the threat facing the citizens of the great northwest is…

Playing bingo too often

Actually, Washington state has always been afraid of too much bingo. Until this year, most bingo operators were prohibited from even offering the game more than three times a week.

Of course, the state law did not apply to the state's many Indian tribes, who operate wide-open unrestricted bingo halls. The charities objected and demanded a level playing field.

Washington lawmakers have been faced with the problem of the level playing field before. Licensed card rooms in the state could offer blackjack to their patrons, but only with a rotating deal. The house was not allowed to participate in

the game, let alone be the banker. Meanwhile the tribes in the state had full-scale casinos (although without slot machines), with regular Nevada-style blackjack.

Four years ago, the clubs demanded that the state legislature do something — and it did. It changed the law, so that licensed card clubs could offer blackjack with a house bank — the same casino game being dealt by tribal casinos.

Now, the Legislature was faced with the question of why tribes should be able to offer bingo all the time, while charities were limited to no more than three times a week.

The easy solution would have been to simply allow charities to offer bingo games whenever they wished. But with legal gambling, changing the laws never comes easy.

A backlash had developed after the card clubs began offering banking blackjack. Most tribal casinos are far from population centers. Players have to make a conscious decision that they are going to drive for hours if they want to play blackjack at an Indian casino.

But Washington's card clubs are in the center of many of its cities. Almost overnight, mini-casinos were available in a lot of people's backyards.

It was clear that the state's charities would have to be allowed to offer bingo games more often if they were going to survive. But, legislators needed a way to show that they understood that they were, once again, voting to expand legal gambling.

The compromise was House Bill 2918, which was approved on April 5, 2002, and went into effect on June 13, 2002. This unusual new law allows charities to conduct bingo more than three times a week, but only if they include the following statement in all their advertising:

"CAUTION: Participation in gambling activity may result in pathological gambling behavior causing emotional and financial harm. For help, call 1-800-5476133."

If a warning is needed, why not require it on all bingo ads? It is not the operators of frequent games who are in danger of becoming compulsive gamblers; it is the players.

Still, in its own, slightly bizarre way, the law makes sense.

Although you don't often hear about compulsive gamblers playing bingo, anyone reading this column undoubtedly knows of someone who is, in fact, addicted to bingo. And bingo addicts do not go to low-stakes, once-a-week church basement games, unless it is the only game in town. The 16-hour a day games are the greatest danger to bingo players' financial and physical health.

Bingo players may also want to point to this new law with something close to pride. After all, they have finally made it.

Warnings have been required on cigarette packs for forty years. In 1976 New Jersey began allowing casinos to open in Atlantic City, but only if they posted warnings and 800- help numbers. Even prepared food packages have to let customers know if they contain products which might create allergic reactions.

Now the dangers of too-frequent bingo have finally been recognized

Bingo players – If your non-playing friends laugh when you say you are going out again tonight, remember, while they will be sitting in the safety of their living rooms, watching TV, you have the courage to face this threat alone, with nothing but a bingo dauber and a good-luck charm.

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