

Op-Ed/Editorials - Come Bet with Me

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For those who monitor the gambling industry, you will want to follow the recent proposal to expand gambling to the airways. Richard Branson, the entrepreneurial British owner of Virgin Atlantic Airlines, announced a couple of months ago that he intends to include blackjack and roulette on his new international fleet of double-decker planes.

A report about flying casinos gets my attention a lot quicker than the usual type of gambling news I have been reading lately in the press, such as how the Governor plans to ply more gambling dollars from the tribes in California. The press release by Branson will have more legs to it than most gambling media stories. Guys like Branson do not just announce news, he makes news. He's a lot like Dan Rather in that way.

But there is a nagging ambivalence about Branson's idea. Is this a sign of gambling expansion gone amok? What's next? Gambling on the Space Shuttle? Or perhaps Branson has devised nothing more than a clever marketing scheme with minimal, if any, health consequences.

To get some clarity on this issue, I asked my campus club lunch group about Branson's flying casinos. My colleagues are legitimate culture vultures. They are particularly astute at clarifying the meaning of cultural happenings. For example, they astutely comforted me that the rapid popularity of youth soccer is not a sign that this game will soon replace baseball as America's number one sport. The reason so many kids play soccer is "to avoid having to watch it." And they predict that Michael Jackson will be found innocent by the jury. "He will (moon) walk."

They also told me that it's a lot easier to go free if you are a pop star than if you are a fertilizer salesman, which is Scott Peterson's profession.

So how did my culture vultures respond to Branson's gambling plan? With more superficiality than alarm. Instead of public health warnings, they toyed with the idea. At one point they engaged in a silly game of inventing new slogans that Virgin Atlantic flight attendants will need to learn. A sampling:

"You are now free to move about the gambling area."

"Please fasten your money belt."

"Please return your betting table to a full and upright position. We will be cashing in your poker ships soon."

"It has been a pleasure serving your gambling needs and we hope you will gamble with us again."

So my culture vultures are nonplussed. Maybe I should follow their lead. After all, research tells us that the overwhelming majority of people who gamble apparently do so in a safe and fiscally-responsible manner. How much harm could result from a few Branson casinos flying around in international airspace?

Note to Branson's marketing department. You have a great opportunity here to spice the games a bit. Brits like Branson love to place odds on all sorts of events. Why not invent innovative airline games that we can all enjoy? I offer this one suggestion: An airline racing game, with a real-time radar screen, where bets are placed on which flights will arrive at their destination on time. It could be called p-air-mutuel betting.

This is not to say that we should drop our guard when it comes to the dangers of gambling expansion. I for one will sound the public health alarm when gambling shows real expansion, such as if it were to expand beyond Las Vegas and Atlantic City. And I rue the day if gambling were to show up in that other space - cyberspace. Now these expansions seem worthy of our attention.

And if I am ambivalent about such trends, I will seek the input from my culture vultures.

What do you think? You can address comments to Dr. Ken Winters.