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Boom time for gambling

Growing in metro area

By MARGARET PRICE

DAILY NEWS WRITER

Long after the crestfallen crowds rooting for Smarty Jones left Belmont Park last month, Brooklyn's Kristian Gonzales of Brooklyn was still wagering on the horses.

Gonzales, now 30, has been betting on horse races since he was a kid. Today, he wagers about 3% of his gross annual income. He goes to OTB parlors sometimes three-to-four days a week. He also does account wagering on the phone, and occasionally bets via the Internet. And now and then, the freelance film and video editor goes in person to Belmont Park.

"Sometimes I feel like a degenerate," chuckled Gonzales about the frequency of his gambling. "But for me, every horse race is a puzzle. What's exciting is to make a betting decision and act on it."

And increasingly, others are being smitten by the betting bug. More gambling venues, coupled with greater publicity about everything from big horse races to high-rolling in Atlantic City and Las Vegas, are helping fire up public interest.

Last month, Smarty Jones fever produced attendance records at Belmont Park and wagering on the Belmont Stakes - the third leg of racing's Triple Crown.

The World Poker Tour has been the Travel Channel's highest-rated series. And this year, Las Vegas expects to draw a record 36 million visitors.



Sabo for NEWS

Cocktail waitress Stacey Romano is kept busy by the big numbers of bettors trying their luck at Monticello Raceway's new video lottery terminals.



Handschuh NEWS

Kristian Gonzales plans next horse-racing bet.

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Nationwide, gambling hit a record \$69.6 billion in 2002, more than seven times the amount spent on movie tickets that year, according to Christiansen Capital Advisors.

New York is showing notable gains in some forms of gaming. While charity bingo and horse races have been flat, the New York Lottery reported its lotto sales climbed 18% in the past four years. Even more impressively, scratch ticket sales catapulted 172% during the same period.

This year, video gaming slots at racetracks debuted in New York. It's currently available at three upstate tracks. Gamblers were obviously pleased. Through June 14 players spent some \$592 million wagering on these video lottery terminals.

And this may just be the start.

"With additional Indian casinos, along with more video games, you could expect a lot more gambling in New York," likely at the expense of New Jersey and Connecticut, said Bennett Liebman, head of the racing and wagering law program at Albany Law School.

Yonkers Raceway is seeking 5,500 video lottery terminals, while Aqueduct wants 4,500 such terminals, he said.

Last Wednesday, Mighty M Gaming, which features 1,800 video gaming machines, started at Monticello Raceway.

Recently, the prospect of an Indian casino in the Catskills became closer to reality. The Pataki administration reached an agreement with the Cayuga Nation to settle Indian land claims designed to produce a Las Vegas-style gaming hall - the closest casino to New York City.

This 1.6 million-square-foot, \$500 million facility, called Cayuga Catskill Resort, will take 18 months to build next to Monticello Raceway. It's expected to be the first of three Indian casinos in the Catskills.

But not everyone is thrilled.

"We definitely think there's a public health issue (with gambling). And it's only getting worse," said James Maney, executive director, New York Council on Problem Gambling. He cited the effect of video gaming terminals at upstate racetracks, calling these fast-acting, slot machine-like, devices "probably the most addictive form of gambling."

If such video terminals open, as expected, at Yonkers and Aqueduct, the gambling problems they address could go "completely unaddressed," he warned.

That's because of the extreme shortage of state-funded gambling treatment facilities in New York City, Maney said.

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