

DeFazio accuses NFL team owners of bribery

WASHINGTON (AP) — NFL owners are threatening to pull complimentary Super Bowl tickets from congressmen who oppose their effort to ban sports lotteries, Rep. Peter DeFazio charged Wednesday.

Representatives of professional sports also are using expansion teams as bargaining chips to garner votes for the measure to outlaw the lotteries, the Oregon Democrat said.

NFL Commissioner Paul Tagliabue and Steve Greenberg, deputy baseball commissioner, are among those who have testified before Congress in favor of outlawing the gambling games. The games offer payoffs to wagerers who pick a series of NFL or NBA winners.

But DeFazio, whose state runs the only such game in operation, said the more effective lobbying effort is taking place behind the scenes as team owners and others "overtly and implicitly" threaten to take away lawmakers' free tickets to the Super Bowl.

"That's as offensive as a major industry calling me up and saying, 'Well, we were going to give you a campaign contribution, but we are going to withhold it until we see how you vote on this bill,'" he said in an interview.

DeFazio said several sources have reported such activity to his office and that several members of Congress have told him they have been contacted by a local team owner or prominent sports figure.

"In sort of a half-joking way, they ask me if I am going to be able to get them Super Bowl tickets (to replace the complimentary ones). I would say the frequency that I hear this so-called joke leads me to believe there is some truth to it," he said.

"It's a cheap vote for them because right now it only affects Oregon and it puts them in good with the fat cats of professional sports," DeFazio said.

Even more important financially, he said, is the threat that leagues will refuse to consider expansion teams for states where representatives oppose

the ban on sports lotteries.

"The franchise threats I have not heard first-hand, but I have heard it is going on at the state level, with mayors and governors. It seems to be awfully prevalent," he said. "They are being told that they may be thinking about a sports lottery but they better back off; otherwise, they are not going to get an expansion team."

Officials for the NFL and Major League baseball offices in New York said no one was immediately available for comment. A spokesman for Rep. John Bryant, D-Texas, a sponsor of the ban, said the charges were "nonsense."

DeFazio said Super Bowl tickets carry much weight with lawmakers.

"Sports are the most common trivial conversations around here. If you are not talking about politics you are talking about sports," he said.

"I'm hoping when we talk about this on the floor (of the House) we can shame some of these folks into standing up to these sports bullies," he said.

Oregon's lottery netted the state about \$2.6 million last year, its first year in operation, with a portion of the profit going to support Oregon's intercollegiate athletics.

Gamblers are given a chance to wager \$1 on a game card by picking the winners of a series of NFL or NBA games. Jackpots are divided among those who pick all the winning teams correctly.

"The Oregon sports lottery is simply the office pool on a slightly larger scale," said a letter signed by Oregon's entire congressional delegation.

The NBA has sued in an effort to halt the game.

Backers of the ban on such lotteries - included in the omnibus crime bill pending before Congress - argue that state-sanctioned gambling compromises the integrity of sports.

"I can think of no greater threat to an athlete's personal sense of accomplishment than governmentally sanctioned sports gambling," said former Cincinnati Bengals linebacker Reggie Williams, now a Cincinnati City Council member.

Tagliabue told a congressional subcommittee this summer

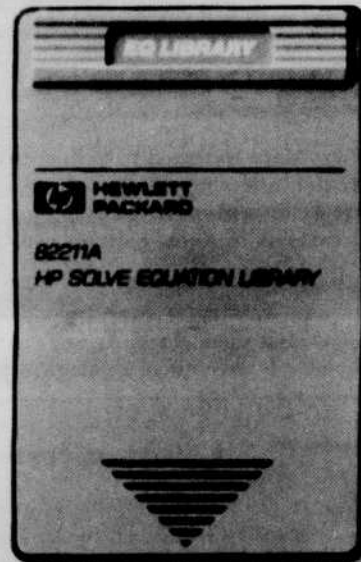
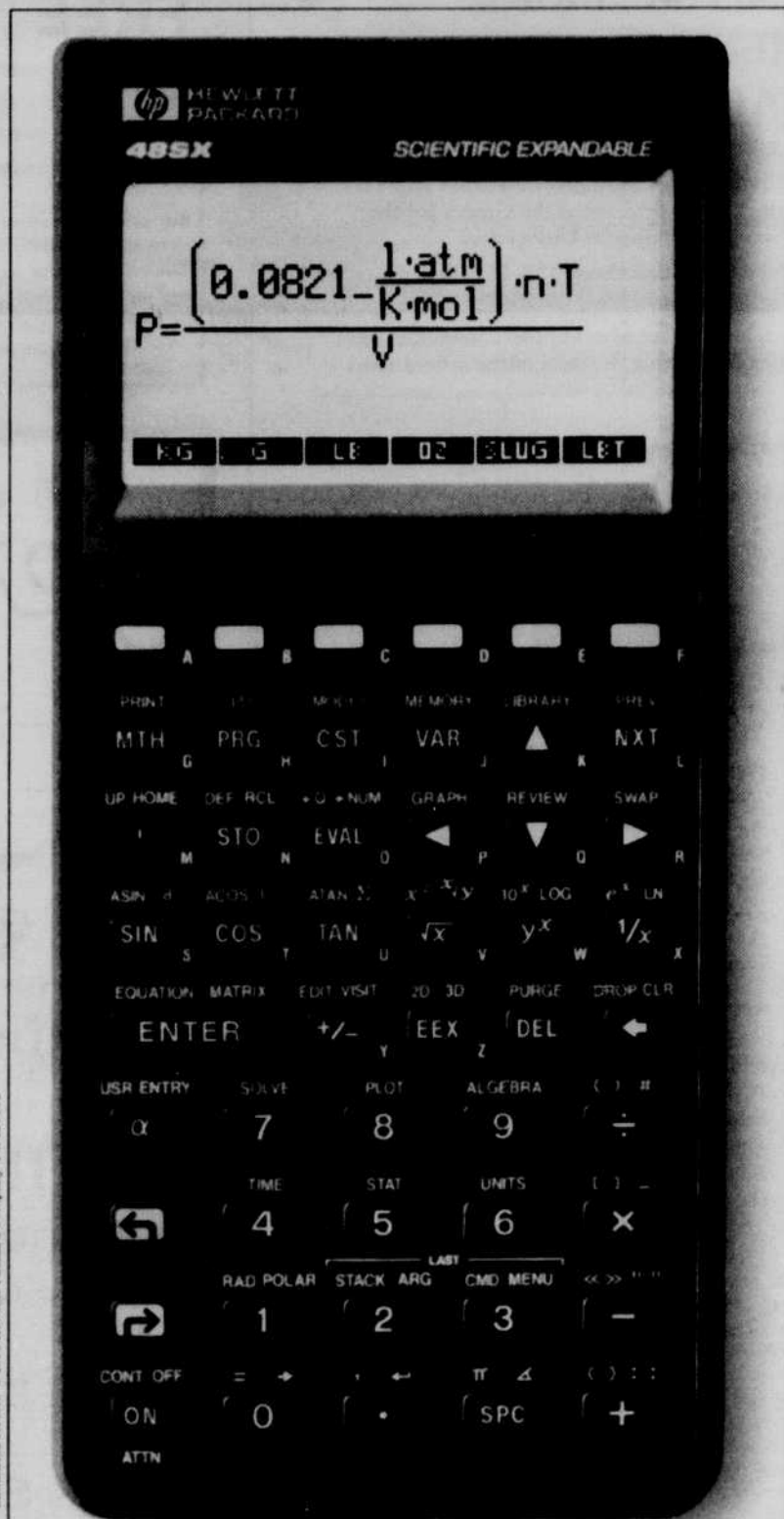
the gambling games will "create a pervasive air of suspicion about controversial plays in NFL games."

"They will come to represent... the fast buck, the quick fix, the desire to get something for nothing," he said.

Oregon Lottery Director Jim Davey told the same panel that professional sports leagues should concentrate their anti-gambling efforts on Nevada, where billions of dollars are wagered on the outcome of games.

"Who would be more likely to try to fix a football game? A guy with a \$1 million bet in Las Vegas on a single game or a guy with a \$2 bet who would have to fix 14 games to win only \$84,000?" he said.

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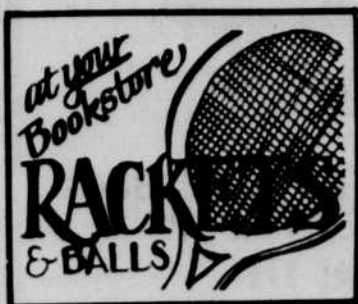
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