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The Loss of a Sports Betting Giant

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The loss of John English in February shocked the gaming industry like few others. English was a trailblazer in the legal sports betting field and introduced mobile wagering to the U.S., along with being generous with his time and expertise.



Last month, John English passed away after a brief illness. While many in the gaming industry may have heard John's booming baritone voice at any of a multitude of domestic and international gaming conferences, far fewer know of the impact that John had on the sports betting and greater casino industries, and the innovations that he was responsible for.

John came to Nevada as a teenager from Buffalo, New York. At the time, Nevada was the only jurisdiction in the United States where sports betting was legal. As an avid sports fan and sports bettor, John took a hobby and turned it into an avocation. His passion for the game evolved and he sought to develop products and services that would not only enhance the sports betting experience but revolutionize the industry through innovation and technology.

The Introduction of the Sports Betting Kiosk

One of John English's most innovative ideas was the development of one of Nevada's first sports betting kiosks. This occurred in an era when WIFI, and even wired internet, were still in their infancy, and internet communications still required a dial-up connection. He envisioned a system where a sports bettor could communicate with a betting terminal via a dial-up connection to a betting machine. He presented the

concept to Nevada regulators, who may have had some misgivings with a system that relied on phone lines. John eventually presented a more robust concept and ultimately received approval for SBX, a stand-alone sports betting kiosk.

Mobile Wagering

John joined American Wagering Incorporated (AWI) in 2009, the company founded by Vic Salerno. AWI operated approximately 130 Leroy's Sports Books across the state of Nevada. While by that time, sports betting kiosks had evolved and were widely available in satellite locations across the state, John envisioned how technology could bring the sports betting experience closer to the consumer.

At AWI, he started work on developing Nevada's first mobile sports betting app that would work on a Blackberry, at the time the most popular mobile telecommunications device. With each successive model (and different sized screen), John worked with Blackberry developers to refine the concept and ultimately introduced mobile sports betting on that platform. The introduction of the iPhone allowed John to incorporate new features and ease the transition as subsequent iPhone models were introduced.

John continued to explore other features and technologies to enhance the security features of mobile wagering. These included facial recognition and the adaptation of artificial intelligence to further enhance wagering integrity. John was also instrumental in developing some of the first Nevada Gaming Control Board-approved geolocation technologies.

The William Hill Sale

While at AWI, John served an integral role in the sale of AWI and the Leroy's Sports Book brand to William Hill, the British bookmaker. While large mergers and acquisitions require legions of attorneys and accountants, John had the unique ability to show the true and unrealized potential that a well-capitalized company such as William Hill could have with this acquisition. Whether demonstrating AWI's products to the William Hill team in taverns or standing on the rooftop lounge of The Palms Hotel Casino expounding the long-term opportunity that sports betting in Nevada represented, he was able to communicate that vision and help seal the deal on one of the more consequential acquisitions in sports betting history.

The Million Dollar Ticket

John's expertise extended beyond sports betting. In fact, one of his most innovative ideas involved melding the concepts of lottery with electronic gaming. For example, he developed the Million Dollar Ticket. John recognized that, despite laws that prohibited lotteries in the state of Nevada, there was an exception for a lottery-style bonus if it were made available through machine wagering. The Million Dollar Ticket brought life-altering jackpot bonuses to slot and video poker machines in Nevada taverns. It too was approved by Nevada regulators and the product was introduced across the state.

John formed WEBE Gaming, LLC, a brand licensing and private equity investment firm specializing in casino gaming and related verticals. John became a regular speaker at the ASEAN Gaming Summit, held each year in Manila, as well as numerous conferences across Asia and Latin America. He built relationships and continued to develop products for legal sports betting markets across the globe.

Salerno, chairman of AWI, is a member of the AGA's Gaming Hall of Fame, and was a close confidante of John.

"John's biggest asset was that he always had ideas that were way outside of the box," Salerno said. "He just thought of things that no one else did, and he had the ability to bring people together."

Ken Jolly, vice president and managing director, Asia, for Light & Wonder observed, "John had a personality that instantly made you want to know this interesting, fun, larger than life individual. He was a true friend to many."

Anthony Cabot, a law professor at UNLV's Boyd School of Law, former gaming attorney, and close friend and associate of John English commented, "John was the definition of an enthusiastic entrepreneur. He embraced new innovations in the gaming industry and, often contrary to the industry's hesitancy to change, found success. A world of inventors and dreamers lost an ally."

John English was a true innovator, and the products and processes he developed changed sports betting and electronic wagering. He developed innovative betting systems, brought those concepts to Nevada regulators, and got those systems approved, which is no small feat for anyone who has tried. Once the U.S. Supreme Court repealed the Professional and Amateur Sports Protection Act in 2018, other states introduced mobile and kiosk sports betting, and John's concepts became ubiquitous in the products that Americans use today when making a sports bet.

Aside from recognizing the importance of technology in improving the sports betting experience, John's greatest strength was his innate ability to bring companies and people together, and help orchestrate partnerships and mergers.

For anyone sitting in front of their television on a Sunday afternoon, staring at their phone and making a bet, they can thank John English for developing and introducing those technologies to gamblers, and making the games much more enjoyable. He was a titan in the gaming industry, and his contributions will be long lasting.
