

# (USA) Oddmakers don't have Final Word

By : Sarah Talalay

Date : Sunday, February 3, 2002

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**A handful of oddsmakers will gather today at the offices of Las Vegas Sports Consultants, tune in to a dozen televisions, enjoy a spread of Italian food -- sandwiches and pizzas -- and settle in for Super Bowl XXXVI.**

It doesn't matter their main job for the big game was completed a week ago.

With four minutes to go in the St. Louis Rams-Philadelphia Eagles NFC Championship, the oddsmakers took a season's worth of knowledge and factored in history, injuries, the conditions at the Superdome and of course the matchup: Rams vs. New England Patriots. And then, they sent the number 16 to bookmakers across Nevada. Their Super Bowl work isn't quite complete. They'll watch the game with an eye toward picking a halftime line, on which bettors in Las Vegas will have just minutes to wager. They'll watch the commercials, too, but they'll also grade propositions, those bets that compare actions across sporting events, such as field goals versus missed free throws by Los Angeles Laker Shaquille O'Neal. Setting the line is Cesar Robaina's bread and butter. The 37-year-old odds manager at LVSC, a subsidiary of VegasInsider.com, the Fort Lauderdale-based online analysis of sports betting, has been doing it for 16 years. Watching games, studying players and history so he can send the first line on games from football to college basketball.

LVSC provides the odds for about 90 percent of Nevada's sports books. It's part art and science, says Robaina and Russ Culver, director of sports analysis for VegasInsider.com.

But an oddmaker's line is only the first word, not the final. Bookmakers have already adjusted the line to 14 because, Culver explains, they weren't getting "two-way action," meaning the number of bets on both sides wasn't equal.

That's the way bookmakers make money. But if bookmakers change the line and the teams hit it exactly, that spells disaster as they have to refund everyone's money -- and pay the winners. So, why do bookmakers so often set the line at football numbers such as 3, 7 or 14?

"You need a cannon to blow them off the [football] number," Culver said. "If he's high on one side, he'll take the gamble."

With the Super Bowl, however, it's tough to gauge the line that's best for business. After all, the professional bettors, or wise guys, bet first; the casual bettor, sometimes known as "squares," don't get involved until the final weekend.

Last year, more than \$67 million was wagered legally in Las Vegas, down from a high of \$77.25 million in 1998, according to the Nevada Gaming Control Board. Legal bets in Las Vegas need to be made in person; other bettors patronize off-shore betting establishments.

Robaina says rule adjustments and free agency have made the job more challenging. In the NFL, for example, free agency and salary caps have meant fewer dynasties and players shifting among teams.

"It's tough for us," Robaina says, "but it's also tough for the bettors."

And over the years, proposition betting has exploded with some bookmakers offering as many as 200 categories.

"It's got to be in good taste," Robaina said. "We want to keep it to a sporting event. It can be Super Bowl against a basketball game, not Super Bowl against the temperature outside. Believe it or not, people have tried to do that ... The best props are where [bettors] can sweat throughout the game and they can keep track of it themselves."