

Written by Administrator
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Moments before he was to stand trial for bilking The Meadows Racetrack and Casino out of nearly a half-million dollars in fraudulent jackpots, a Swissvale man was arrested Monday by federal authorities, who say he actually may have stolen as much as \$1.4 million from casinos in the U.S. and abroad.

"I wasn't there, but I heard that he was fairly surprised," Washington

County District Attorney Steven Toprani said about the reaction of Andre Nestor, 39, who was arrested by FBI agents as he prepared to enter the courtroom of Common Pleas Court Judge Janet Moschetta Bell.

Federal agents acted quickly to arrest Mr. Nestor -- who had been free on \$100,000 bail -- before the beginning of his trial on 650 felony counts of theft, criminal conspiracy, computer trespassing and other charges.

Mr. Nestor and an associate were accused of exploiting a software glitch in a slot machine at the North Strabane casino so it would display bogus jackpots. But authorities in Nevada say the scheme was much larger and involved casinos in Las Vegas and perhaps worldwide.

Agents on Sunday obtained an arrest warrant on charges of conspiracy to commit wire fraud against Mr. Nestor and John Kane of Las Vegas.

After meeting with federal officials, Mr. Toprani said he agreed to turn over prosecution of The Meadows case to the U.S. attorney's office in Nevada, which will consolidate the case with others.

"We were very happy to support the FBI in this investigation," Mr. Toprani said, noting that The Meadows case would be an essential element in the federal prosecution. "This will be a global prosecution."

The pair, according to police, had knowledge of a software glitch in one of the high-bet slot machines. In order to expose the glitch, a special "double-up" feature had to be internally

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activated. The men persuaded casino technicians to alter "soft" options on the machines, such as volume and screen brightness controls. Such perks aren't unusual for high-rollers, who can wager anywhere from a few hundred to thousands of dollars in one day.

One Meadows employee, who was not criminally charged or accused of wrongdoing, agreed to enable the double-up feature on the machine with the glitch.

Normally, such a feature would allow a player to risk doubling his winnings or potentially losing them all. The double-up feature isn't usually enabled on the machines in part because it's unpopular with most gamblers, who are unwilling to risk large amounts of money.

When the correct sequence of buttons was pushed, the machine displayed false double jackpots. No casino officials noticed because the bogus jackpots weren't being recorded in the machine's internal system.

Throughout April 2009, Mr. Kane frequented Las Vegas casinos, practicing his technique in a "test run," according to authorities, before calling his friend Mr. Nestor in Pennsylvania.

From May 1 to June 15 in 2009, agents said Mr. Nestor joined Mr. Kane in Las Vegas, where the duo allegedly cashed in phony jackpots "over and over again" and perfected a scheme to exploit the same glitch in casinos across the world.

By June 22, 2009, Mr. Nestor returned to Pennsylvania, where he and roommate Kerry Laverde, 51, are accused of concocting a plan to target the glitch at a Meadows slot machine.

Police said during 14 visits to the Meadows over the next two months, Mr. Nestor cultivated an image as a "high-roller," generously tipping employees, while Mr. Laverde, a former Swissvale police officer, acted as Mr. Nestor's personal security guard.

Mr. Nestor and Mr. Laverde allegedly took turns cashing in their bogus jackpots so as not to

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draw attention, and enlisted the support of another man, Patrick Loushil, 43, of Brookline, who agreed to cash in five jackpots for them.

The trio cashed in winnings totaling \$429,985.

The scheme eventually unraveled when a state gaming control board agent noticed the high payoffs and began an investigation.

Last week, Mr. Loushil pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor charge of unsworn falsification and was expected to testify against Mr. Nestor and Mr. Laverde in exchange for probation. More than 300 criminal charges against him were dropped.

Jury selection for the trial of Mr. Nestor and Mr. Laverde was scheduled to begin Monday morning, but after Mr. Nestor's unexpected arrest, Mr. Laverde hashed out an agreement with local prosecutors.

He pleaded guilty to three misdemeanor counts of receiving stolen property, agreed to serve three years of probation, and to make full restitution to the casino.

Mr. Toprani's office said more than \$430,000 had been seized in safety deposit boxes, bank accounts and assets. He said the federal government suspects the group may have stolen as much as \$1.4 million from various casinos.

The lion's share of the cash, including several hundred thousand dollars from two bank safety deposit boxes, will be held in reserve until the federal case is heard, Mr. Toprani said.

Mr. Laverde isn't expected to face federal charges, and his lawyer, Patrick Thomassey, said his client's only role in the scheme was to act as security for Mr. Nestor and to deposit the cash.

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Mr. Nestor is expected to be extradited to Nevada soon.

The machine's manufacturer, International Game Technology of Reno, Nev., did not respond to requests for comment. A spokeswoman for the U.S. attorney's office in Nevada said the investigation is ongoing.

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