

MLB Partners with MGM Resorts, Keeps Aim on Preserving Integrity of Baseball

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Nearly a century after the “Black Sox” scandal marred the 1919 World Series (and baseball overall) prompting the introduction of a Commissioner to oversee Major League Baseball (MLB) in an effort to preserve and restore “integrity” to the game, MLB announced the formation of an all-inclusive partnership with MGM Resorts International to be its official gaming partner. Per the MGM Resorts’ official release, the partnership combines the MLB brand with MGM Resorts brands across team and league sponsorships, data usage in gaming, promotion across MLB-owned media platforms, and domestic and international activations at MLB events.

MGM will use MLB’s digital and broadcast platforms to promote its brand and gaming options. What does this mean? Simply, that MGM is now an official sponsor of MLB and is an “MLB-Authorized Gaming Operator”—bet on baseball and MLB would like fans to do so through MGM’s gaming options.

Once taboo to even mention gambling in the same breath as baseball, it is now an acceptable ancillary source of revenue for MLB. MGM’s presence will be at the forefront of MLB with its brand stamped across all MLB media platforms. Certainly, the 2018 Supreme Court decision *Murphy v. National Collegiate Athletic Association* (finding the Professional Amateur Sports Protection Act violated the 10th Amendment) paved the way for the MLB/MGM partnership—if gambling on professional sports is legal in those states that have approved it, why not put a hand out to recoup some revenue? Increased “fan engagement” and additional revenue sources certainly serve as the backdrop to such an agreement. However, with gambling—even when officially endorsed by MLB—there is the ever-present concern of preserving the “integrity” of the game. Such was the mantra of Judge Kennesaw Mountain Landis in 1920 and every commissioner thereafter. Indeed, betting on baseball as a player or manager is still against Major League rules, but MLB partnering with a global sportsbook potentially invites a host of logistical complications.

The first public move MLB has taken to limit risks to integrity came last week when it announced it is requiring all teams submit their lineups to the Commissioner’s office fifteen minutes prior to releasing them publicly. To this, an MLB spokesman provided a statement to *Legal Sports Report*: “We are updating a number of our procedures to reduce integrity risks associated with the expansion of sports betting in light of the Supreme Court’s ruling last May. One new procedure is that we now ask Clubs to submit starting lineups in a uniform fashion in order to reduce the risk of confidential information being ‘tipped.’ This approach mirrors those of international sports leagues in more developed betting markets.”^[1] This certainly begs the question how this procedural mandate will ensure that such information would not be

“tipped” before releasing to the Commissioner’s office. Or, what happens with a last minute scratch from a lineup that has already been released to the sportsbooks?

While couched in terms of maintaining integrity, what this new requirement actually speaks to is MLB satisfying a business partner’s demand for this information first, so that the information could be disseminated to its gambling operations, or sportsbooks. MGM is purchasing statistical data from MLB and as its new partner wants to ensure it is the first to set betting lines. So, a business partner of MLB is now effectively dictating how team managers announce their lineups, bypassing their respective media or public relations protocols. Is this direct presence of a sportsbook dictating—at least one facet of team policy—troubling? Is this a slippery slope generating opportunities for gambling operations to further control pregame issues? Will it encroach upon in-game decisions? Who knows? But what is known is that gaming operations are now present in baseball, and with this presence comes a strict responsibility to ensure the integrity of the game is protected. That could be a tall task.

[\[1\]](#) *Legal Sports Report, MLB Makes First Move to Weaponize Official Data In Lineup Dustup*, Adam Candee, March 7, 2019.