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ME!**

**LAS VEGAS
MAYOR, A
FORMER MOB
LAWYER FROM
PHILLY, IS OUT
TO LURE A
BIG-LEAGUE
SPORT TO
SIN CITY**

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JOE CAVARETTA/for the Daily News
**Oscar Goodman has
Expos in his sights.**



VEGAS MAYOR:

If you have a heart,
give us a club

By **MARK KRAM**
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LAS VEGAS — So you're probably wondering what a plastic horse's head is doing in Mayor Oscar Goodman's 10th-floor office at City Hall. You wouldn't be if you saw "The Godfather," the part where movie mogul Jack Woltz wakes up in horror to discover that a Corleone operative had slipped the severed head of his thoroughbred between his expensive sheets to persuade him to give singer Johnny Fontane his big break in Hollywood. Goodman's replica is a cute decorating touch — perhaps too cute, given the lineup of mob figures he has represented during his career as a defense attorney — but that's not why we're here today. Goodman would like to lure a pro sports franchise to Las Vegas, which he says would just go crazy over a competitive team: "Vegas loves a winner!"

What Las Vegas loves even more than that is a *loser*, of which the city imports legions on an hourly basis from across the world; you can find them in any casino jamming quarters into slot machines. It's why Las Vegas was founded by gangster Bugsy Siegel back in the old days and it's why it continues to prosper under the aegis of legitimate corporations that have adopted a business plan that has eschewed blood flow for cash flow. The very existence of Las Vegas depends on bringing you into the casino and keeping you there, which is why for years the decor in the hotel rooms has been so uniformly garish; they want you downstairs playing. Goodman understands the principle in play, yet says he was "hotter than fish grease" when the casino operators rejected his plea to sign on to the criteria set down by NBA commissioner David Stern, who said Las Vegas would not get a team unless the sports books stopped taking wagers on their events. Says Goodman, who concedes that pro sports will never succeed here unless the casinos buy into the concept: "I had just hoped to see some altruism."



JOE CAVARETTA/For the Daily News

Oscar Goodman, whose city's sports books doomed NBA talks, has competing groups in town trying to attract the Expos.

Of even larger concern to the dapper ex-Philadelphian is convincing the leadership of pro sports to buy into Las Vegas. While sports betting has fueled to varying degrees the popularity of pro sports and the athletes themselves come here in droves whenever they can to relax — that is to

say, play the tables — the four major sports have been inclined to steer clear of Las Vegas to assure that their veneer of propriety remains undisturbed. Competing groups are taking a run at landing the vagabond Montreal Expos, one of which plans to build a privately funded, 40,000-seat, re-

tractable-roof stadium a block from the Strip. Major League Baseball is weighing the pros and cons of that, in addition to offers from the Washington, D.C., area and Portland, Ore., among others; commissioner Bud Selig said recently that he expected the owners to decide by mid-July.

Can the very sport that produced the Pete Rose affair and the 1919 Black Sox Scandal now hop into bed with the gambling capital of the universe? Goodman shrugs.

"Look, the only protection *any* of these sports have against scandal is the regulatory supervision that Nevada gaming imposes on the sports books," says Goodman, irritation climbing in his voice. "Over the years, whenever we have spotted a shift in a line, they have called in the FBI, which comes in and arrests someone

"For every one of his critics, you can find
25 people who just adore him."

JOHN L. SMITH, on Oscar Goodman

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who is tampering with the game. Without Nevada doing that, there is really no entity or agency out there that has that responsibility. Without Nevada, there is no telling what would be going on."

Goodman then adds with a twinkle in his eye: "So you see it is hypocrisy to even suggest there is something untoward or unseemly about an association with Las Vegas."

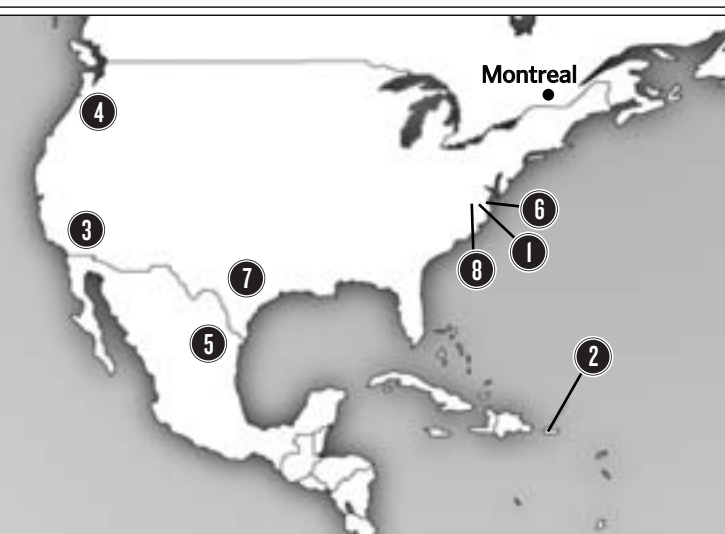
Mr. Popularity

If you'd like an idea of what Las Vegas once looked like, stroll through the downtown area, where on this gray March day a big crowd has formed in anticipation of the gala reopening of Binion's Horseshoe Hotel & Casino. Unlike the dazzling displays of opulence up on the Strip, downtown has a flophouse feel to it, given on certain corners to encamped derelicts steeped in the glow of pulsing neon. Up Fremont Street are a strip joint, The Girls of Glitter Gulch, and a casino called Mermaid's, where a video screen plays an ad for "Deep Fried Twinkies." While the Horseshoe has been the symbolic foundation of old Las Vegas, a place where you could wager any sum and founder Benny Binion would take your action, it has been closed since a squad of gaming agents and U.S. Marshals raided it in January due to bookkeeping irregularities. Control of the property has passed from the Binion clan into corporate hands, yet it remains the site of the World Series of Poker and a sentimental favorite that still offers up that \$1.95 breakfast.

Goodman is here today for the ribbon-cutting ceremony. As the appointed hour nears — 4 p.m. — the crowd outside the Horseshoe begins to swell. Soon there will be cupcakes and champagne for everyone; but first, there's a few words from Goodman, who's up on the platform and surrounded by statuesque showgirls wearing headpieces of extravagant plumage. Grinning from ear to ear — and who wouldn't, given the bevy of beauties on either side of him — Goodman introduces the Keystone State Boys Choir from Philadelphia, a group of well-scrubbed young men whose voices are drowned out by the anticipatory undercurrent. When they're done singing, Goodman then steps

THE EXPOS' NEXT HOME

Baseball commissioner Bud Selig has said he'll announce by mid-July where the Expos will be playing next season. Here's a glance at their potential destinations.



Site	Proposal	Plus	Minus
1 Northern Virginia	Includes new stadium near Dulles Airport.	Dense population, yet far enough away from Baltimore.	If going here, why not just be based in Washington?
2 San Juan, P.R.	Renovate the present stadium, adding 12,000 seats.	They're already playing 22 games here.	Attendance isn't much better than what they're drawing in Montreal.
3 Las Vegas	Build \$420 million, 40,000-seat retractable dome stadium.	Growing area; loads of tourists; warm, dry climate.	The Aladdin, Bally's, Caesars Palace ...
4 Portland, Ore.	Gather \$350 million in financing for a new stadium.	Already home to NBA Trail Blazers and Triple A baseball.	More post-midnight games for East Coast fans.
5 Monterrey, Mexico	Expand stadium to 35,000 capacity.	Provides that first push south of the border.	Players union won't like that Houston to Monterrey to Phoenix to San Diego road trip.
6 Washington, D.C.	Construct \$340 million stadium in RFK Stadium parking lot.	Puts baseball back where it belongs.	Makes Orioles owner Peter Angelos very, very angry.
7 San Antonio	Expand present stadium, which seats 7,000.	Could double as a home with Monterrey, Mexico, or Austin, Texas.	How about an average summer high temperature of 95?
8 Norfolk/Hampton Roads, Va.	Construct \$300 million, 38,000-seat stadium.	Virgin pro territory; backing of billionaire Paul L. Johnson.	Could a team in Hampton Roads draw 20,000 people on a Wednesday night?

— Paul Vigna

BRAD J. GUIGAR/Daily News

up again and says with gesturing hands: "This [reopening] is critical to the success of the future of Las Vegas." He then jokes that if his efforts to reopen the Horseshoe had failed, he would have moved back to Philadelphia.

The ribbon then is cut and the doors open.

Colorful streamers shoot into the air as a succession of champagne bottles pop; the cupcakes are inside.

The throng of bodies charge into the old casino, where within seconds the gaming tables are up and running.

Goodman calls himself "the hap-

piest mayor in America," and with good reason, given the extent of his popularity with the voters. They love him here. When he announced he was running for mayor back in 1999, the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* was so certain the apocalypse was at hand that it published an editorial under the headline: "Anybody but Oscar." Citing the array of lawless characters he defended through the years — including Philip Leonetti, once under boss of the Philadelphia crime family headed by Nicodemus "Nicky" Scarfo; Nick Civella, chief of the Kansas City syndicate; and scores of others —

the paper labeled Goodman the "barrister to butchers." Goodman won that election, then won re-election last year by a whopping 86 percent, of which Goodman says with a chuckle: "I am still looking for the 14 percent who voted against me." Says *Review-Journal* columnist John L. Smith, who authored "Of Rats and Men," a penetrating book on Goodman: "For every one of his critics, you can find 25 people who just adore him. I call it 'The Cult of Oscar.'" When asked if Goodman could have been elected in any other city but Las Vegas, Smith pauses and says, "May-

be Reno."

Whatever Goodman is or has been, he has always had a keen interest in sports. Growing up in West Philadelphia on Catherine Street and later Christiana near 61st, he played at Central High and later Haverford School, yet says of his athletic abilities, "I was always the last player on the team." He remembers going with his dad, an attorney, on several occasions to see the Phillies play the Dodgers at Shibe Park. "I saw Jackie Robinson steal home three times," he says. "Nothing was more exciting." He remembers as a young boy how he became acquainted with the thrill of wagering, how this "seedy old guy" used to come around the school grounds. You picked three baseball players and if they got six hits, it paid 6-to-1. Goodman says he used to bet the nickel he was given for lunch.

He smiles. "I sort of prefer those days to these," Goodman says. "They were great old days. They were days when you could root for your team and really feel an attachment to your city. I would like to establish that here."

Goodman came to Las Vegas in 1964 with his new bride, Carolyn, with \$87 in his pocket. He says when they began their drive across America, the Phillies were in first place. "By the time we arrived here, they were finished," he says. With a degree from Haverford College and a juris doctorate from the University of Pennsylvania, he found Las Vegas had unlimited opportunities, which only increased as he began taking on the government in defense of such legendary crime figures as Meyer Lansky. Two of his clients back then, Frank Rosenthal and Tony "The Ant" Spilotro, would be played by Robert De Niro and Joe Pesci, respectively, in the film "Casino." Goodman played himself in the movie. He had an excellent winning percentage against the government — which he generally attacked as consisting of liars and cheats — and was cited as one of the top defense attorneys in the United States. He viewed his courtroom battles as "an athletic contest," of which he says now: "I loved getting up in the morning, and fighting as hard as I could to protect my clients."

Did he have any qualms with the degree of criminality with which clients were involved?

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THE VEGAS SPORTS LINEUP

They do play other games in Las Vegas, besides the ones inside the casinos. A peek at other threads in the Vegas sports fabric.



Nevada-Las Vegas Runnin' Rebels: They were Las Vegas sports during the Jerry Tarkanian days, from 1973 to '92. His 1976-77 team scored more than 100 points a game, and his 1986-87 team went 37-2 and reached the Final Four. UNLV alumni playing pro sports include Keon Clark (Phoenix Suns), Keenan McCardell (Tampa Bay Buccaneers), Brian Boehringer (Pittsburgh Pirates) and Chris Riley (PGA Tour).

The 51s: Once called the Stars, at least back when

Larry Bowa was managing there. In 2001 they became a farm team of the Los Angeles Dodgers and changed their name to the 51s, after the hush-hush government base known as "Area 51," which is located about 120 miles northwest of Las Vegas. Their caps, sporting the alien logo, are among the country's top sellers among all minor league teams.



Gladiators: An Arena Football League team. You remember that, don't you? The Soul? Bon Jovi? The Gladiators won Sunday to finish 8-8. The Thomas & Mack Center is their home arena.

Wranglers: Hockey? In Vegas? Hey, they're in the Western Conference of the East Coast Hockey League, along with other hockey havens such as Reno, Nev., Long Beach, Calif., and Anchorage, Alaska. A farm team for the NHL's Calgary Flames, they play a 72-game schedule.

Eastside Cobras: One of two developmental semipro football teams in the region. They join the Las Vegas Extreme in the West Coast Football League.

Las Vegas Motor Speedway: You know NASCAR's no longer just a Southern sport when you see this Vegas palace, called the "Diamond in the Desert." It's a \$200 million state-of-the-art facility that covers 1,600 acres. Dale Earnhardt Jr. and the boys were here for the UAW-DaimlerChrysler 400 in March.

— Paul Vigna

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This question comes up frequently.

Goodman is prepared.

"I was defending their constitutional rights," he says. "And it gave me a lot of money, so I could become the mayor." He pauses and adds, "And as my mother would say, Oscar never defended anyone who hurt anybody; they just killed each other."

Does he expect his background to come up as a negative in negotiating with the commissioner's?

He frowns, then says sharply, "Absolutely not."

Banging on doors

Larry Bowa chuckles and says, "It would be a *definite* homefield advantage." Bowa, the Phillies' manager, spent the 1986 season in Las Vegas managing the Triple A

affiliate of the San Diego Padres. In a shrewd ploy, Bowa told his players the first week there that, if they so chose, they could go out and hit the casinos. He figured — correctly — that they would "get their butts handed to them," get it out of their system and concentrate on playing ball. So while the visiting teams fell prey to the lure of the nightlife — which they always did — the home team cleaned up on the field. It is perhaps no coincidence that, after finishing third during the first half of the season, the Stars came on strong and won the second half.

So yeah, Bowa would be in favor of having a team in Las Vegas, saying: "It would be fun."

Some of his players are uncertain.

Phillies lefthander Randy Wolf enjoys Las Vegas — during the off-season. "I love it there, but it is 'The City of Sin,'" he says. "It nev-



JOE CAVARETTA/For the Daily News

Oscar Goodman's office features photos of a different kind of family than those he used to represent.

er closes, so it would take a lot of willpower not to fall into it."

Pat Burrell is not sure who would want to play there, due to the potential distractions. "I'm sure the park they build there would be accessible to the Strip," says the 27-year-old leftfielder, who has a photograph of the Rat Pack above his locker. "I know I wouldn't want to play there. I wouldn't even want to be in the same division. I guess I could take it for 3 days, but even then . . ." He pauses and adds, "The obvious is there."

The obvious is, well . . . do you have an hour? While Las Vegas once energetically advertised itself as a vacation destination for families, you get the very strong sense now from Goodman and others that the accent is on portraying the city as an adult Disneyland. Up on the Strip, the casinos are overflowing with customers, the women in strapless cocktail dresses and spiked heels, the men in open-collared shirts and heavy gold chains; business is on a sharp upswing. On the pavement are flyers from dozens of escort services, distributed from long rows of honor boxes and the jutting hands of what appear to be illegal aliens; business also ap-

pears to be doing well in this sector of the economy. While Goodman says certain people have objected to his slogan, "*Whatever happens here, stays here,*" he says with a chuckle, "I myself happen to think it is pretty good." Goodman then points out that, outside the Strip, Las Vegas is just like another ordinary American city: People go to work, send their children to school and so on. What he does not volunteer is that the divorce and suicide rates in Nevada are the highest in the United States.

Sports franchises have been something less than a huge hit here, which gives rise to the question: Why even bother courting MLB, the NFL, NBA or even NHL? The Triple A baseball team is supported by the fans, but other teams have come and gone, propped up by what Smith calls "the latest huckster" and then disbanded under the weight of civic torpor. Goodman believes a winning team would do exceptionally well in Las Vegas, and as proof points to the phenomenal success UNLV enjoyed from 1973 to '92 under controversial coach Jerry Tarkanian. "All I can tell you is that it was the hottest ticket in Las Vegas," says Goodman, who adds

that whenever he would travel to Philadelphia or New York, he would always see kids with UNLV caps on backward. Goodman laughs and says, "I knew they never crossed the river, yet they identified with Nevada."

The mayor pauses and says, "So the question is not whether we will support a team, but whether we will support a team that is not a winner."

Goodman says he has yet to meet with commissioner Bud Selig, but he has had two meetings with "high-ranking officials in his office" to discuss bringing the Expos to Las Vegas. Goodman says, "We would have them if we had a domed stadium. That is just my opinion." Columnist Smith says that "for the first time there appears to be some serious money" behind the talk. In play at this point are two groups: One is from Chicago, led by Lou Weisbach, an entrepreneur, and Cubs broadcaster and former Cy Young Award winner Steve Stone; the other is California-based Centerfield Management Group, which represent a New York developer and has drawn up plans for a sta-

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adium on land it plans to lease from Caesar's Entertainment Inc.

Goodman says of the possibility of landing the Expos: "The people I spoke to with MLB have been very civil... They have not voiced the same objections that I heard from the NBA."

Goodman met with the NBA's Stern a few years ago and found that he had a largely "enlightened view of Las Vegas," where the Maloof family, which owns the Sacramento Kings, owns The Palms Casino. Goodman says Stern understands "the way we regulate sports betting and how that is beneficial to everyone," yet adds that Stern told him that as long as he is commissioner, he is not interested in having an NBA team in Las Vegas unless the sports books refuse to accept wagers on their games. Goodman says he told Stern that "there is more betting at Madison Square Garden during a Knicks game than all the sports here on

all the games on any given day." When Goodman tried to get the casinos to buy into "a UNLV rule" — which is to say, no betting on the local NBA team — he found them less than cooperative. Goodman shrugs, "What can I say? They are our U.S. Steel and IBM, so for this to work they have to be on board." Dallas owner Mark Cuban and Sacramento co-owner Gavin Maloof said in January that they would favor Las Vegas as their top choice for a 31st franchise, but an NBA spokesman said the league has no plans to expand. Nor does the NHL.

That leaves the NFL.

Goodman faced better odds when he went to court with Tony "The Ant."

The NFL has taken what Goodman calls an anti-Las Vegas stance during the last two Super Bowls, which has Goodman perplexed in light of the big boost the league has gotten from gambling. In 2003, the NFL would not accept Las Vegas advertisements for halftime of the Super Bowl

broadcast, which provoked Goodman to sound off so vociferously that "we ended up getting more advertising than we could have ever paid for." This year, the league stepped in and disallowed casinos holding Super Bowl parties to televise the game. Goodman says he is very disappointed with the position of the NFL on Las Vegas. He has not yet met commissioner Paul Tagliabue because the atmosphere has been "too acrimonious." He says he regards the comments by the NFL on Las Vegas to be bitter, but says he hopes his comments on the NFL "are twice as bitter."

He then says, "One of these days, Mr. Tagliabue and I are going to sit down and have a talk."

Memories all around

When he was practicing law, the walls of Oscar Goodman's office were arrayed with photographs of himself with "family" members: he and Nicky Scarfo, Spilotro, the bunch of them. But now that Goodman's running Las

Vegas, he has toned down his old profile somewhat, and the only family pictures around his offices now are of his wife, Carolyn, and their four adult children. And yet he's still a battler, especially when it comes to parrying with his critics. When a Nevada Ethics Commission panel scheduled a hearing that investigated allegations that he violated state ethics law by holding a cocktail party promoting a company in which his son is financially involved, an irritated Goodman told a news conference, "I'm going to run the city the way I want to run the city." The commission could not agree whether Goodman acted willfully, and cleared him of three other allegations: his free use of a luxury car; his acceptance of a \$100,000 contract to endorse a brand of gin; and his temporarily naming a city street after a magazine contest winner.

So the "happiest mayor in America" gets an occasional squall here and there, but as he says, "The weather is going to be

80 degrees today, the traffic is running beautifully, and the overall quality of life is excellent." On his office wall are photographs of Goodman with what appears to be every celebrity who has ever passed through town, including one of A-Rod, one of the Dodgers' Shawn Green and even one with some Phillies players from a few years ago. In a glass case are a ball he received from the Harlem Globetrotters and boxing gloves he received from Muhammad Ali. "A bit of everything here," he says. When the tour is over, he holds out his hand to shake and say goodbye, but as he does, something suddenly occurs to him.

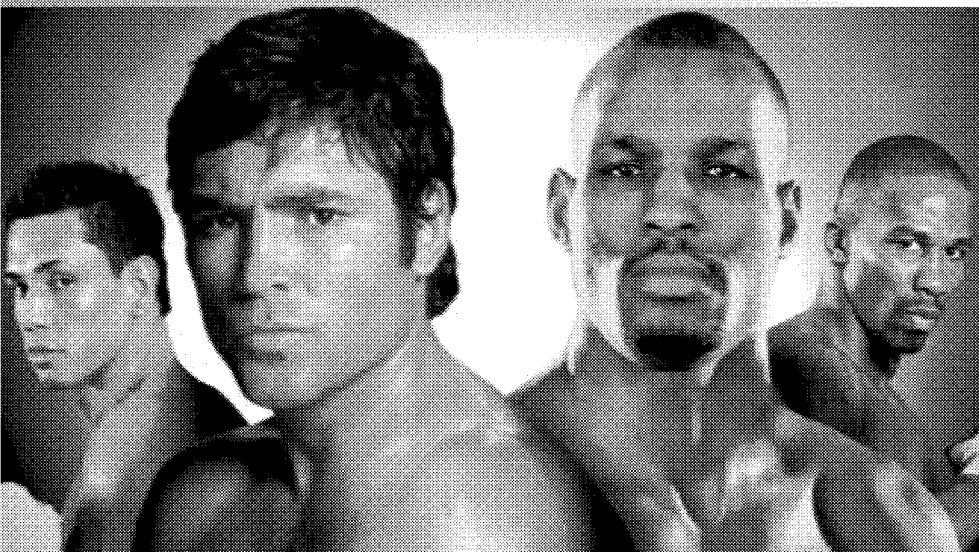
A twinkle once again forms in his eye.

"Hey," he says. "I hear Skinny Joey got off in New Jersey."

He was told that's true: Joey Merlino had been acquitted in March of ordering a 1996 hit in Newark.

Goodman then nods approvingly, as if admiring the handiwork of a fellow artisan: "That was a nice win for him." ★

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