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I am here to address the subject of the publication of college point spreads in hundreds of publications across the country.

It's a subject sports editors have been debating for the past several years. I've been in the middle of it as the sports editor at The Austin American-Statesman and now as a member of the sports staff at The Cleveland Plain Dealer.

The publication of the college line became an issue for us when the NCAA's basketball committee considered a plan to coerce sports editors to stop publishing the line. At the time, I was an officer of the sports editors' national organization, the Associated Press Sports Editors (APSE). Now, I don't know if any of you have ever attempted to coerce a newspaper editor not to publish something - but I don't advise it. It doesn't work. You push that button and you're going to hear all about the First Amendment. You're going to see editors digging in their heels and calling their lawyers.

Of course, you know all about the First Amendment, so I won't give that speech now - except to issue the disclaimer that I can't speak for other sports editors or other newspapers. Each newspaper has the right to decide its own editorial content.

What I CAN do, what I am here to do, is share with you the positions and attitudes of the sports editors who have been embroiled in these discussions.

Ever since the NCAA challenged the sports editors to examine their policies and follow their good judgment, the issue has been coming up at our national conventions and in our newsletter.

We have seen some top publications discontinue publication of the college line, including The New York Times and The Sporting News. First on that front was The Washington Post, which am told has never published the college line.

The Los Angeles Times has scaled way back, publishing only the college football line, and that only once a week instead of daily. I asked Bill Dwyre, sports editor of The L.A. Times, why he would distinguish between football and basketball. He said he would like to drop all betting lines -- for all the reasons the NCAA has put forward about why betting on college sports is a problem - but he acknowledges some informational value to the football lines. As

he put it, "Knowing Texas is favored by 3 points over Texas A&M tells me a lot about the relative strengths of the two teams. A 3-point spread in basketball is good for nothing but gambling - and that's not legal in California.

What the L.A. Times has done is strike a compromise between the two sides of the issue as it is most often broken down by sports editors. On one hand, we are not acting responsibly when we publish a betting line knowing full well that it is going to be used for illegal gambling; but on the other hand, we are in the business of giving our readers the information they want, because if we don't, they'll get it elsewhere.

We are in competition not just with other newspapers but with television and the internet.

When I was asked to drop the Latest Line from the Austin American-Statesman, I was torn.

Personally, I don't think it is right for us to publish college betting information. And I'm not saying that to take a moral stance against gambling. People who want to gamble can find legal outlets. But having covered college sports for decades, knowing what it's like for those kids on campus, knowing the presence of bookies in the fraternities and dorms, knowing what a mistake in judgment could cost those young athletes, I am of the belief that the NCAA is not crying wolf. There is a real crisis pending for college sports.

I continued publication of the Latest Line because I was a sports editor in the middle of Texas, a state crazy for college sports, at a newspaper trying to compete with Dallas, San Antonio and Houston. All of those newspapers publish the line.

I am now on the staff of Ohio's largest newspaper, The Plain Dealer. We publish the Latest Line because our readers expect it and because the sports editor, Roy Hewitt, is of the belief that information cannot be illegal.

The line is set in Las Vegas, where betting on college sports is legal. We are simply telling our readers what the gamblers there are doing. But if gambling were NOT legal anywhere in the United States? Would we seek out information from bookies conducting an illegal business? The Plain Dealer would not.

What I have heard from other sports editors leads me to believe that most newspapers would take the same position and stop publishing college betting lines - which would take away the legitimacy college gambling gets from being included in daily newspapers.