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From the Buffalo Business First:

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## Meet lawyer Jeff Ifrah, the Buffalo native helping the gambling industry form its future

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Attorney Jeff Ifrah had never worked as hard to pick up a client in his 28-year legal career.

Finally, during a trip home to Western New York to visit family, he drove to Niagara Falls and barged into the Seneca Gaming Corp. offices to once more try to convince management to set up sports betting operations in Western New York.

“That’s the only time I ever pitched someone, I think,” Ifrah said. “I literally just walked into their headquarters and said, ‘You’ve got to do this.’”

“I think there’s a lot (of potential) there and if mobile sports betting comes to New York, it’s going to be huge. There’s only going to be seven or eight casino partners that are going to be able to offer it. That’s a pretty huge opportunity for Seneca and for Buffalo.”

Ifrah ultimately did work with the Seneca Nation of Indians as it established sportsbooks at its casino properties in Buffalo, Niagara Falls and Salamanca.

His Washington, D.C.-based firm, Ifrah Law, solicited proposals alongside Oakvale Capital from businesses interested in assisting Seneca Gaming as it set up the technological and managerial side of operations. The Kambi and Bragg Gaming groups were selected.

Sports betting opened in the region late in 2019. New York had followed other states that relaxed rules that had long forbidden legalized wagering. A 2018 decision by the U.S. Supreme Court declared the Professional and Amateur Sports Protection Act, which had barred sports gambling since 1992, to be unconstitutional.

Covid-19 quickly shut down most of the sporting events on which people are most interested in placing wagers, but Ifrah said he thinks the gambling industry will bounce back in short order once more leagues resume play. As indicators, he pointed to the quick rise DraftKings and other casino-related entities have had in the stock market since their initial public offerings hit Wall Street this spring.

“I think everyone believes sports are going to come back, and it’s going to be fine,” he said. “It’s not impacting the valuation of these companies. I don’t see anything slowing down.”

He is heavily embedded in the industry and has a variety of clients engaged in different sectors that are seeing their companies expand and grow new frontiers of business. A decade ago, that would have been unthinkable with online-gambling restrictions firmly in place.

Ifrah was raised in Buffalo and attended Williamsville South High School before leaving to start early studies at Yeshiva University in New York City. He continued on to Yeshiva’s Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law.

In 1998, Ifrah had never heard of online sports betting when the firm he was then working with, Paul Hasings LLP, asked

him to look into a case in New Jersey involving an Austrian company that caught the eye of the New Jersey attorney general's office for advertising online services in the state.

That led him to taking charge of similar cases brought to the firm. He wound up representing payment processors in online gaming, and clients grew from there.

"I ended up meeting a lot of people, some of whom became very successful with online sports betting and online poker," he said.

Ifrah launched his own firm in 2009 and started to collaborate with some of the same entities as they lobbied for changes in regulations that would allow them to do business in particular states.

"It all took off from there," he said.

### **The pandemic's impact**

Casino operators are currently navigating two very different environments as a result of Covid-19, he said. On one hand, states such as Delaware, New Jersey and Pennsylvania since mid-March have seen an uptick in online gaming as people were stuck at home.

Meanwhile, Covid-19 shutdowns forced revenues for operators of many traditional casinos and their attached resorts to fall to zero until they were able to reopen.

Recovery, according to Ifrah, may not be easy.

"There's already been a spike of Covid-19 cases in Las Vegas associated with the reopening," he said. "Regulators and operators are going to be very concerned about how land-based casinos can essentially recover and rebuild.

"It's going to be more complicated than simply adding plexiglass to poker tables and disinfecting slot machines. There's a lot that remains to be seen there."

What casinos can provide in terms of online gambling varies by state. Some have permitted online sports wagering through casino-backed-and-branded apps, but approvals for other forms of gaming have been slow to come, such as with digital slots or poker. New York has remained hesitant to allow any online gambling, though legislators such as State Sen. Joseph Addabbo Jr. of Queens have **made the push a priority**. They say that, through taxes, it could boost educational programs and offset other state expenses.

Online poker playing was at an all-time high in April and May, Ifrah said.

"In both New Jersey and Pennsylvania, you had the big sites adding more tables and tournaments to the tune where they had never seen that (much demand) before," he said.

### **What could be ahead**

While sports have been on hold, peer-to-peer gaming apps that Ifrah said had floundered suddenly started to appear among the top downloaded on mobile devices. Some are his clients, he said.

"You had these apps that no one heard of become prime-time players," he said.

The next frontier in gaming and gambling – and the last bastion in states such as New York and others – is accessibility and permission to do more with online gaming in the jurisdictions where consumers reside.

"You're reaching a wider audience, not a narrower one," Ifrah said. "In New York, none of that is available."

Before sports betting was legalized in New York state, bettors were traveling to out-of-state casinos to place wagers. Many said that created a situation where New York missed out on tax dollars that could have easily been had.

Now the conversation has ramped up around mobile betting and wagering. In addition to being more accessible to consumers, Ifrah said that creates new revenue opportunities for casino businesses that can further expand and create more jobs.

He said other upstart ventures are working to make casinos cashless to prevent germ spread, with patrons eventually making payments via apps on their phones on casino floors.

"It's definitely going to be an added convenience for the casino customer," he said.

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