U.S. Department of Justice

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Eastern District of New York

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PRESS RELEASE

31 DEFENDANTS, INCLUDING MEMBERS AND ASSOCIATES OF ORGANIZED CRIME FAMILIES AND NATIONAL BASKETBALL ASSOCIATION COACH CHAUNCEY BILLUPS, CHARGED IN SCHEMES TO RIG ILLEGAL POKER GAMES

Defendants Allegedly Used Wireless Technology to Cheat at High-Stakes Card Games

Earlier today, at the federal courthouse in Brooklyn, a seven-count indictment was unsealed charging 31 defendants in criminal schemes to rig illegal poker games at various locations in New York City, East Hampton, New York, and throughout the United States. This morning, 31 defendants were arrested in 11 states, including members and associates of the Bonanno, Gambino, and Genovese organized crime families of La Cosa Nostra (LCN); Chauncey Billups, head coach of the Portland Trail Blazers of the National Basketball Association (NBA); and Damon Jones, also known as "Dee," a former NBA player with the Cleveland Cavaliers and Miami Heat. The defendants will make initial court appearances this afternoon at federal courthouses throughout the United States, including the Eastern District of New York.

Joseph Nocella, Jr., United States Attorney for the Eastern District of New York; Kash Patel, Director, Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI); Christopher G. Raia, Assistant Director in Charge, FBI, New York Field Office (FBI); Ricky J. Patel, Special Agent in Charge, Homeland Security Investigations, New York (HSI); Jessica S. Tisch, Commissioner, New York City Police Department (NYPD); and Phoebe S. Sorial, Executive Director, New York Waterfront Commission, announced the arrests and charges.

"As alleged, members and associates of organized crime families fixed illegal poker games as part of a highly sophisticated and lucrative fraud scheme to cheat victims out of millions of dollars and conspired with others to perpetrate their frauds," stated United States Attorney Nocella. "Well-known former NBA players and former professional athletes, acted as 'Face Cards' to lure unsuspecting victims to high-stakes poker games, where they were then at the mercy of concealed technology, including rigged shuffling machines and specially designed contacts lenses and sunglasses to read the backs of playing cards, which ensured that the victims would lose big. Today's indictment and arrests sounds the final buzzer for these cheaters."

Mr. Nocella also thanked Homeland Security Investigations Newark for their valuable contribution to the case.

"Today over 30 people were arrested and charged for their alleged roles in criminal schemes to rig illegal poker games to win large amounts of money. These individuals used technology and deceit to scam innocent victims out of millions of dollars – eventually funneling money to La Casa Nostra and enriching one of the most notorious criminal networks in the world," stated FBI Director Patel. "This investigation spanned 9 states and FBI offices, and I want to thank the men and women of the FBI for their tremendous work and dedication rooting out those actors responsible. This FBI will never stop following the money to pursue and find those who break our laws."

"Using the allure of high-stakes winnings and the promise to play alongside well-known professional athletes, these defendants allegedly defrauded unwitting victims out of tens of millions of dollars and established a financial pipeline to La Cosa Nostra," stated FBI Assistant Director in Charge Raia. "This alleged scheme wreaked havoc across the nation, exploiting the notoriety of some and the wallets of others to finance the Italian crime families. Our office maintains its aggressive pursuit of any Italian organized crime operating in our jurisdiction and will continue to stem all unlawful revenue streams fueling their illicit activity."

"With the alleged involvement of three La Cosa Nostra crime families, an NBA head coach and Hall of Famer, as well as other current and former professional athletes, the investigative work that culminated with this morning's operation are reminiscent of a Hollywood movie. But this was not luck, and it was not theatrics," stated HSI New York Special Agent in Charge Patel. "Over four years ago, HSI New York uncovered the operation and worked tirelessly with HSI Newark, the FBI, the New York Waterfront Commission, and the NYPD to expose crimes that defrauded victims of at least $7 million dollars and included violent robberies. I commend all agencies and personnel involved in today's sweeping arrests, which should serve as a testament to our relentless, evidence-driven and unified effort."

"For years, these individuals allegedly hosted illegal poker games where they used sophisticated technology and enlisted current and former NBA players to cheat people out of millions of dollars," stated NYPD Commissioner Tisch. "This complex scheme was so far reaching that it included members from four of the organized crime families, and when people refused to pay because they were cheated, these defendants did what organized crime has always done: they used threats, intimidation, and violence. I want to thank the incredible team at the NYPD that worked diligently on this case, and our partners in the FBI, HSI, and the U.S Attorney's Office for their collaboration in shutting down this illegal gambling ring."

"Today's indictment represents a concerted effort to combat traditional organized crime, which continues to plague our communities," stated Waterfront Commission Executive Director Sorial. "The arrests of members from three La Cosa Nostra crime families is a stark reminder that they are not averse to working together to advance their sophisticated schemes when it serves their interest. Disruption of their illegal gambling proceeds weakens their grip on our region, particularly in the Port of New York where they have long held influence. The New York Waterfront Commission, in close coordination with its federal, state and local law enforcement partners, remains unwavering in its commitment to dismantle these criminal enterprises by severing the illicit revenue streams that sustain them."

As alleged in the indictment, beginning as early as 2019, the defendants engaged in a series of schemes to use wireless cheating technology to rig illegal poker games (most commonly, Texas Hold'em) in the Eastern District of New York and across the United States. Co-conspirators in the scheme included game organizers, who arranged for unwitting victims to play in underground illegal poker games that were secretly rigged; suppliers of the rigged cheating technology; former professional athletes, who were enlisted as "Face Cards" in the scheme to entice the victims' participation in the games; cheating teams who worked together using the cheating technology to defraud the victims; money launderers; and members and associates of the Bonanno, Gambino, and Genovese organized crime families of LCN, who backed games in the New York area and took a percentage of the crime proceeds from those games. LCN members and associates had a foothold in the rigged poker scheme because they had preexisting control over "straight" (*i.e.*, non-rigged) illegal poker games in New York City, where some of the rigged poker games also occurred: one that was hosted principally at Lexington Avenue in Manhattan, that was on record with the Bonanno family (the "Lexington Avenue Game"); and a second that was hosted principally at Washington Place in Manhattan, that was on record with the Gambino family (the "Washington Place Game"). As part of the schemes, some of the charged defendants and other co-conspirators also committed acts of violence, including the robbery and extortions charged in the indictment.

In a typical legitimate poker game, a dealer uses a shuffling machine to shuffle the cards randomly before dealing them to all the players in a particular order. As set forth in the indictment, the rigged games used altered shuffling machines that contained hidden technology allowing the machines to read all the cards in the deck. Because the cards were always dealt in a particular order to the players at the table, the machines could determine which player would have the winning hand. This information was transmitted to an off-site member of the conspiracy, who then transmitted that information via cellphone back to a member of the conspiracy who was playing at the table, referred to as the "Quarterback" or "Driver." The Quarterback then secretly signaled this information (usually by prearranged signals like touching certain chips or other items on the table) to other co-conspirators playing at the table, who were also participants in the scheme. Collectively, the Quarterback and other players in on the scheme (*i.e.*, the cheating team) used this information to win poker games against unwitting victims, who sometimes lost tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars at a time. The defendants used other cheating technology as well, such as a chip tray analyzer (essentially, a poker chip tray that also secretly read all cards using hidden cameras), an x-ray table that could read cards face down on the table, and special contact lenses or eyeglasses that could read pre-marked cards.

The defendants and their co-conspirators bet accordingly to ensure that the unsuspecting victims lost money. Through the rigged poker schemes, the defendants caused losses to victims of at least $7 million.

As alleged, members of the conspiracy fulfilled different roles to ensure the schemes' success. The defendants Tony Goodson, Shane Hennen, Curtis Meeks, and Robert Stroud supplied the cheating technology. The defendants Ammar Awawdeh, Saul Becher, John Gallo, Zhen Hu, Stroud, and Seth Trustman organized the rigged games. Members of the cheating teams included the defendants Nelson Alvarez, Louis Apicella, Chauncey Billups, Eric Earnest, Marco Garzon, Jamie Gilet, Tony Goodson, Kenny Han, Hennen, Horatio Hu, Damon Jones, John Mazzola, Nicholas Minucci, Michael Renzulli, Angelo Ruggiero, Jr., Stroud, Trustman, and Sophia Wei. In addition, the defendant Anthony Shnayderman, among others, laundered the proceeds of the schemes. For example, game organizers sometimes directed victims to send money via bank wires to shell companies controlled by Shnayderman, who then transferred money (either in cash or cryptocurrency), less a money laundering fee, back to the game organizers.

As alleged in the indictment, the Bonanno, Genovese, and Gambino organized crime families of LCN backed the Lexington Avenue Game and the Washington Place Game and received a portion of the criminal proceeds from both the "straight" illegal poker games and rigged games run by the organizers of those games. In particular, Becher, Zhen Hu, and Trustman—the organizers of the Lexington Avenue Game—were required to make payments to defendants Ernest Aiello, Julius Ziliani, and Thomas Gelardo of the Bonanno family for the games (rigged or "straight") that they operated. Similarly, Awawdeh and John Gallo—organizers of the Washington Place Game—were required to make payments to the defendants Lee Fama, Joseph Lanni, and Ruggiero of the Gambino family and to the defendant Matthew Daddino of the Genovese crime for the games (rigged or "straight") that they operated. For a period in 2023, the two games merged and were jointly operated. During that period, all three organized crime families received proceeds from the rigged and illegal poker games.

As charged in the indictment, members of the conspiracy committed violent acts, including assault, extortions, and robbery, in furtherance of the schemes to ensure the repayment of debts and continued success of the operation. Between November 2022 and February 2023, Gelardo, Zhen Hu and Ziliani extorted John Doe #5 to secure the repayment of a gambling debt. Among other things, Zhen Hu and Gelardo both punched the victim to get him to pay back the debt. In September 2023 and October 2023, Becher, Zhen Hu and Trustman extorted another victim by threatening him to pay back a debt from illegal poker games. On September 7, 2023, Awawdeh, Hoti, Mazzola, Minucci, and Stroud arranged and committed a gunpoint robbery of a co-conspirator to steal a rigged shuffler machine that the defendants wanted to use.

Bettors who were defrauded in the rigged games may be victims under the Mandatory Victims Restitution Act. If you believe you were a victim of the scheme, please contact 1-800-CALLFBI.

The charges in the indictments are allegations and the defendants are presumed innocent unless and until proven guilty.

The government's case is being handled by Office's Organized Crime and Gangs Section. Assistant United States Attorneys Michael W. Gibaldi, Irisa Chen, and Sean M. Sherman are in charge of the prosecution with the assistance of Paralegal Specialists John

Schneider and Marlane Bosler. Assistant United States Attorney Michael Castiglione of the Office's Asset Recovery Section is handling forfeiture matters.

<u>The Defendants</u>:

ERNEST AIELLO
Age: 46
Wantagh, New York

NELSON ALVAREZ (also known as "Spanish G")
Age: 53
Uniondale, New York

LOUIS APICELLA (also known as "Lou Ap")
Age: 50
New Rochelle, New York

AMMAR AWAWDEH (also known as "Flapper Poker" and "Flappy")
Age: 34
Brooklyn, New York

SAUL BECHER
Age: 45
Bronx, New York

CHAUNCEY BILLUPS
Age: 49
Lake Oswego, Oregon

MATTHEW DADDINO (also known as "Matty" and "The Wrestler")
Age: 43
Franklin Square, New York

ERIC EARNEST (also known as "Spook")
Age: 53
St. Louis, Missouri

LEE FAMA
Age: 57
Brooklyn, New York

JOHN GALLO
Age: 53
Brooklyn, New York

MARCO GARZON
Age: 39
Elizabeth, New Jersey

THOMAS GELARDO (also known as “Juice”)
Age: 42
Scarsdale, New York

JAMIE GILET
Age: 40
Jericho, New York

TONY GOODSON (also known as “Black Tony”)
Age: 52
Forsyth, Georgia

KENNY HAN
Age: 40
Queens, New York

SHANE HENNEN (also known as “Sugar”)
Age: 40
Las Vegas, Nevada

OSMAN HOTI (also known as “Albanian Bruce”) and “Big Bruce”)
Age: 44
Ridgefield Park, New Jersey

HORATIO HU (also known as “H”)
Age: 37
Queens, New York

ZHEN HU (also known as “Jonathan Chan,” “Jonathan Hu,” “Scruli,” and “Stanley”)
Age: 37
Brooklyn, New York

DAMON JONES “also known as “Dee Jones”)
Age: 49
Houston, Texas

JOSEPH LANNI
Age: 54
Staten Island, New York

JOHN MAZZOLA (also known as “John South”)
Age: 43
Gray, Georgia

CURTIS MEEKS (also known as “Curt”)
Age: 41
Elgin, Texas

NICHOLAS MINUCCI
Age: 39
East Northport, New York

MICHAEL RENZULLI
Age: 42
Islip, New York

ANGELO RUGGIERO, JR.
Age: 53
Howard Beach, New York

ANTHONY SHNAYDERMAN (also known as “Doc”)
Age: 39
Brooklyn, New York

ROBERT STROUD (also known as “Black Rob”)
Age: 67
Louisville, Kentucky

SETH TRUSTMAN
Age: 43
Queens, New York

SOPHIA WEI (also known as “Pookie”)
Age: 40
Queens, New York

JULIUS ZILIANI (also known as “Jay”
Age: 54
Wayne, New Jersey

E.D.N.Y. Docket Nos. 25-CR-314 (JMA)