

Ex-'wise guy' knows the score

By [Matt Winkeljohn](#)

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Published on: 02/20/08

Michael Franzese was at Georgia Tech on Tuesday evening, not the normal stomping grounds for a convicted member of New York's infamous Colombo crime family.

"We're recruiting," Franzese said. "The government's been doing a good job getting our guys off the street; our numbers are down."

Actually, Franzese was a member of the Colombo crime family, did seven years in prison on racketeering charges, and admits to fixing college and pro sports events through point shaving.

He has renounced his life of crime and was joking about recruiting. But he was on campus to persuade in two sessions that were mandatory for Tech athletes.

Leah Thomas, who works in Tech's life-skills programs, hired Franzese to speak about several topics, chiefly dangers inherent with gambling.

"If I have 100 of you in here, I know 25 are gambling or know somebody who is," he said. "I guarantee you I'll have e-mails from some of you when I get to my hotel. My Web site is [Michaelfranzese.com](#). If you've got an issue, we can discuss it.

"I'll guarantee you by the time I get back to my hotel room somebody in this room, probably more than one, will e-mail me to discuss a gambling issue. I was at Auburn [Monday] night; I had six e-mails."

Franzese, who will lecture today at Georgia, has been doing this since 1996, shortly after getting out of prison. He has spoken on more than 300 campuses and addressed NBA and Major League Baseball teams, tennis players and more.

He tells of how he and some of the "300 maniacs" he used to captain in New York convinced student-athletes to shave points.

"When I was on the street, we put many athletes in trouble, both on the professional and college level," he said. "When they got in trouble, they had to pay up. If they didn't, some got hurt, and some were forced to shave games."

Freshman point guard Moe Miller said this lecture was less boring than most.

"We go to a lot of meetings like this," he said. "This one was actually kind of interesting."

Franzese, 57, earned millions of dollars a week in the 1970s and '80s, much of it by bootlegging gasoline.

He said his life changed gradually as he became a Christian at the behest of his wife, Camille, whom he met in 1985.

Franzese said that, yes, he has worried about his safety over the years, and that he knows what college is about, with three of his seven children there now. Franzese also lectured about drugs and alcohol.

He said he never ratted out former associates, but suggested that relying on similar secrecy in this day and age won't work.

"[Former Falcons quarterback] Michael Vick, an example. People that were close to him ... that he financed in that [dogfighting] operation. ... They got arrested and within 48 hours every single one agreed to testify," he said. "What does that tell you? The day of the stand-up guy ... it's over, people."

Thomas got what she wanted out of Franzese.

"I had read the kind of feedback student-athletes have given him," Thomas said. "We do these presentations frequently, and I'm always looking for something that is going to get their attention."

Greg Smith, a sophomore wide receiver, said, "This right here was real. The way he explained how you could make \$10,000 ... it's wrong, but I can see how people would be tempted."