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Ex-mobster a big hit warning college, pro athletes about gambling's dangers

By Howard Fendrich, AP Sports Writer

FAIRFAX, Va. — It's clear right away - long before the woman sitting up front asks, "Did you shoot anyone?" - that this guy with the straight-out-of-central-casting Brooklyn accent and gold chain is not your typical college lecturer.

It's clear from Michael Franzese's life story - the 17 years in the mafia, the millions upon millions of ill-gotten gains, the "Yuppie Don" nickname, the prison term - that he is a breed apart from the professors usually addressing this crowd.

And it's clear, from the wide eyes and dropped jaws in a George Mason University auditorium on a recent evening, that these kids in their gray hooded sweat shirts are listening intently, drawn in by Franzese's message and mien.

They're hearing Franzese deliver the same, simple points he makes to college athletes and coaches, to NBA rookies and Major League Baseball players and umpires, to professional tennis players and NFL veterans.

Know the dangers of gambling, because, he says, "If you don't have a gambling problem, you know somebody that does. Guaranteed."

Be careful not to get mixed in with the wrong crowd.

Don't wind up being forced into the sorts of situations he put athletes in, where they felt compelled to affect the outcome of a game.

In sum: Do as I say, not as I did.

"You make that mistake one time, you're through," Franzese says, chopping the air with his hand. "You've got that anchor around your neck the rest of your life."

He travels the country, spreading his gospel and hoping to affect a life here or there along the way.

"Kids need to hear the message he's sending. It's a powerful message," said Tom O'Connor, George Mason's athletic director and chairman of the Division I men's basketball committee. "The message is about far more than just gambling. He was talking about responsibility, about making the right decisions."

Franzese is not only aiming to do good, of course. He's also running a business.

And right now business is booming, thanks to former Atlanta Falcons quarterback Michael Vick's dogfighting saga, and former NBA referee Tim Donaghy's betting on games he officiated, and mounting questions about match-fixing in tennis.

Appearance requests have been increasing, and Franzese's third book is due out next year.

"I should either be dead - or in prison for the rest of my life."

The son of a mobster, Franzese (fran-ZEECE) set out to find a different path. He would study premed at Hofstra, become a doctor, do some good.

Instead, he was persuaded to join one of New York's organized crime families, then began rising through the ranks and making money. Lots of it.

Eventually, though, able to see the direction in which his life was headed, and inspired to make a drastic change after meeting the woman who would become his wife, Franzese pleaded guilty to racketeering and went to prison in the mid-1980s. It was all part of a whiplash-inducing about-face, as he walked away from the mafia and embraced religion.

"I am a person of faith, not a fanatic. But I am a strong believer, and I don't believe I can make up for what I've done in the past," Franzese said in an interview with The Associated Press after his talk at George Mason. "What I've done, I've done. I have issues with what I've done in the past, and I have regrets."

His response an hour earlier to that query about whether he shot someone?

"That's always the No. 2 question," he began, eliciting chuckles from the students.

"Have I seen it? Have I been around it? Have I been exposed it? Yes," he continued, then paused for effect. "And I'll let you fill in the blanks from there."

"Don't have no co-defendants. Do it alone. That's a former criminal giving you advice if you're going to commit a crime. They probably won't invite me back."

Is it really such a good idea to put the man who speaks these words in a room filled with impressionable college kids?

"I was surprised they would have a guy like that come speak to us," said Folarin Campbell, a guard on George Mason's basketball team. "But what he said makes you think twice about even thinking about gambling."

Why has Major League Baseball hired Franzese to do tours during spring training?

Why did the men's professional tennis tour have him meet with hundreds of players at a tournament this spring?

Why was he invited to speak to the San Diego Chargers and Miami Dolphins?

"You have to know your enemy," said Kevin Hallinan, who recently retired as security chief for Major League Baseball.

It was Hallinan who helped point Franzese toward a second career in the 1990s. A former policeman who helped run the FBI/NYPD joint terrorism task force before working for baseball, Hallinan and counterparts at the NFL, NBA and NHL wanted to put together a video for pro athletes to warn them about gambling and the like.

So Hallinan asked FBI colleagues to recommend a criminal, and Franzese's was one of a handful of names that came up. Franzese starred in the video, "Gambling With Your Life," and later was asked by Hallinan to speak in person to baseball clubs.

"This is a clear and present danger, certainly to professional sports and the colleges as well, and ... it's important, I believe, to get someone to explain what these people do, what their method of operation is," Hallinan said.

He also knew that it was important to grab the audience and not let go, something at which Franzese excels.

"If you know the attention span of professional athletes, I had to really wow them," Hallinan said. "This is the MTV generation, and a talking head was not going to make it happen."

With an easy patter and tales to tell, Franzese makes a lasting impression.

"He demands respect," said Washington Wizards guard Nick Young, who saw Franzese at the University of Southern California and the NBA's rookie transition program. "He tells you how the mob gets you."

Franzese takes his listeners through a scenario of how gambling can lead to owing money, which can lead to owing favors, which can lead to serious consequences.

While the length, content and fees for Franzese's appearances vary, depending on whether he is speaking at a church or a corporate event, to a college team or a pro team, the authenticity always seems to ring true.

"You see that stuff on TV and in the movies. You're not used to seeing it in real life," Dolphins defensive end Jayson Taylor said. "Even as a veteran guy, the more knowledge I can get my hands on, I'm willing and wanting to get it."

Plus, it's much easier to make people believe in the possibility of change if they're listening to someone who did.

That's one of the reasons Grant Teaff, executive director of the American Football Coaches Association, brings Franzese to his group's conventions.

"It's a real dose of medicine he dispenses," Teaff said. "We all have an opportunity to change and to have a positive impact on other people's lives, and he's been able to do that."

"Anybody with a brain is not going to go out there and try to fix the Super Bowl."

As Mike Bantom, the NBA's senior vice president of player development, put it: "He's not speaking in theory. He's speaking from experience."

Asked whether he fixed games, Franzese replied, "Yes. Did it with a number of sports."

He continued: "This stuff with me is '70s and '80s, and I don't see any reason to bring it up. Everyone wants to hear it, but it can't do me any good. I've got a lot of credibility with the leagues at this point, and I enjoy what I'm doing, and the leagues shouldn't be besmirched because you had a couple of bad apples way back when."

During his speeches, Franzese describes one way it might have happened.

Maybe a cohort mentioned that his daughter was dating a basketball player from Such-and-Such University. Or maybe they ran into a college player they recognized at a club and would get to know him.

Then would come the soft sell.

"Hey, you're a great player. But you're 6-foot-2. You're not going to the pros," is how a pitch might start, Franzese said. "You've got a 2.1 GPA. Where you going when you get out of here?"

Then Franzese lowered his voice as he portrayed what would come next: "Look, shave some points. You're favored to win by 10? Win by six. Be smart. Here's some money. Put it in your pocket. You do this for me a couple of times, you've got \$50,000 before you leave school."

Franzese's coda to his re-enactment: "That's real hard for these kids to pass up."

And if someone tried to get out of it?

"You know what my response is?" Franzese said. "Hey, we made a deal. You're not taking money out of my pocket. We're going the distance. What are you gonna do? Go to your coach?"

He said basketball is the easiest sport to fix, because one player or one referee "can have a big impact on a game." Baseball, on the other hand, "is tough." Football? "A little easier," he said.

And the key?

Look for low-profile games.

"There's still a line on the game, money to be spent. You win the same money, but nobody's looking," Franzese said.

Overall, he thinks it would be easier to pull something off nowadays than in his heyday.

"I'd rather be in the business today than when I was in the business, because back then these athletes had to find a bookmaker to gamble," Franzese said. "Today they get in trouble in their hotel room" on the Internet.

He used to place wagers, but not anymore.

"I've seen guys get their arms and legs broken because they're in debt with a bookmaker, go into the hospital, come out, go across town and gamble with another bookmaker the same ... day they come out of the hospital," he said. "So if that's not an addiction, I don't know what is. ... It crosses all gender lines, all race lines. Nobody is immune to a gambling problem."

Franzese doesn't go very far between references to how fortunate he is.

That he survived his previous life.

That he was able to distance himself from it.

That he was able to find a new life.

And that he can hope to help his audiences avoid the things he's witnessed.

"I hope when I'm finished, next time they jump on the Internet, next time they think about placing a bet, my ugly face is going to come up there, and they're going to associate organized crime with the Internet, organized crime with poker," Franzese said. "They're going to remember this night that this mob guy came in and gave them this whole thing, and they're going to associate those two items and maybe they're going to say, 'I shouldn't do this.'"

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