

High rollers: Dealers describe special treatment, abuse

By Michael Melia, AP

UNCASVILLE, Conn. – One high roller requests a refrigerator full of bananas that he squeezes and throws as he gambles. Another urinates against a wall. Other high-stakes players described by a pit manager at Mohegan Sun, one of the world's largest casinos, throw chairs, scream at dealers and expect rules to be bent at the tables.

In the increasing competition for the biggest spenders, casinos are known to pull out all the stops with comped hotel rooms, meals and rebates for a percentage of their losses. But some dealers say efforts to satisfy and retain the players – known as “whales” – go much further, with casinos tolerating abuse and extending courtesies that test the integrity of the games.

“All men are created equal except in the casino,” Glen Costales, the pit manager, said at a hearing before a tribal gaming commission in May. Transcripts of the hearing were obtained by the Associated Press. “If it's a premium player, he gets away with a lot more than the five-dollar player would get away with.”

Costales was testifying in support of a pit boss, Maria DeGiacomo, who was fired this year after the casino accused her of colluding with a high roller by allowing late bets at a blackjack table. DeGiacomo and other employees say dealers frequently grant similar requests from top players.

The player, Matthew Menchetti, was a regular who lost as much as \$50,000 on visits to Mohegan Sun, and a lifetime total of

more than \$1 million. Casino security flagged his play as suspicious in February and asked state police to arrest him and two dealers, but the detective concluded DeGiacomo and another dealer apparently took it upon themselves to keep Menchetti happy and playing, according to a police report, and no charges were filed.

His attorney, John Strafaci, said Menchetti is seeking to have his name cleared by the gaming commission since state police cleared him of wrongdoing. He said what his client was doing was normal for players of his caliber.

Mohegan Sun's president, Raymond Pineault, said its termination of the dealers involved and its ejection of the player demonstrate it does not tolerate any bending of the rules.

Shane Kaufmann, a vice president for a branch of the Transport Workers Union in Las Vegas, which represents several thousand casino dealers, said rules are frequently ignored at high-stakes tables.

"The casinos pretend they have rules that are set in stone, like going into a bank or dealing with a police station. Are they supposed to allow late bets? Absolutely not. Do they do it all the time? All the time," said Kaufmann, a dealer who sees plenty of crude behavior himself. "The abuse, the screaming, the cheating, the sexual harassment. Throwing things around. It's worse all the time."

Gaming commissions enforce the rules at casinos across the country, but the level of scrutiny can vary by jurisdiction. Dealers say state inspectors in Atlantic City, N.J., for one, have a reputation for toughness. In Connecticut, the state does not have any oversight of table games at Mohegan Sun and Foxwoods, where the tribes that own the casinos also control their own gaming commissions.

Costales, who described the banana squeezer and public

urinator without revealing their names in his testimony, said such outrageous behavior is tolerated more these days because of growing competition than when he joined the business three decades ago.

Menchetti, who also was testifying in support of DeGiacomo, told the gaming commission that when he said he'd forgotten to post a bet, DeGiacomo and others generally made accommodations. He said the intention was never to steal – at most, it prolonged his stay at the table – but he expected special treatment, given his level of play, according to the transcript of the hearing.

“It’s no different in my mind than me calling my host and asking him for an extra 2,500 points on my account so I can go purchase something at a Lux, Bond & Green,” he said, referring to a jewelry store.

DeGiacomo said Menchetti did not do anything close to cheating and the two of them became victims of selective enforcement because certain bosses did not like either of them.

DeGiacomo, who is still fighting her dismissal, said rules shifted depending on the player and pit bosses were encouraged to keep high rollers happy. She testified during her hearing: “I have to make sure that we get our money, which we did, every time he played. There’s maybe two times he won.”

As part of the state police investigation, the detective interviewed several dealers who said Menchetti would hit the table, curse and yell at them. They told the detective that in cases where he or other high rollers asked to post a late bet or for other considerations, they would defer to a superior.