

# Sports Gambling by College Students is Not Just Harmless Fun

By: Dr. Tim Otterman

I grew up in the world of sports gambling. I bet on sports throughout my undergraduate education, my brother was a campus bookie, and my father ran a parlay card operation out of a neighborhood bar. I have personally seen the negative consequences that involvement with this insidious activity can inflict.

I recently conducted confidential, life-story research with 14 college students who were actively participating in illegal sports gambling. While the students were involved at various levels, four of the 14 were running bookmaking operations. My study uncovered four critical “guideposts” of involvement related to the introduction and continuation phases of wagering on sports and also gave real-life “voices” to the student sports gambling experience. In the following sections, the key aspects of each guidepost will be highlighted, underscored by quotes (using fictitious names) from the actual student gamblers.

## I. The Start

The first guidepost can simply be identified as “the start,” or the introduction to wagering on sports. Students identified two ways in which they were introduced to sports betting: 1) by middle school or high school friends completing NCAA tournament brackets at school or 2) by their fathers via parlay cards in the home setting.

Ferris, a 23-year-old senior illustrates, “As a senior I played football with showed me the brackets. I was a sophomore. He ran the bracket. Everybody on the team was involved and it seemed like the majority of the school.”

Adam, a 22-year-old senior, said his involvement started at home, “My Dad used to bring home the parlay cards from the college football games that everybody does at work. Me and him would watch sports every weekend together, mostly football. So, he would have me just make the picks and that’s how I learned about the spreads and stuff.”



These findings support research that indicates gambling is connected to a desire to spend time with family and friends. It also is interesting to note that students introduced to gambling by their fathers felt that their involvement was “sanctioned” by an authority figure, which made their participation acceptable.

## II. The Hook

The second guidepost, “the hook,” illustrates why students continued their involvement in sports gambling. The four major reasons given were: 1) the opportunity to make money; 2) excitement of the wager; 3) opportunity to use sports knowledge; and 4) social bonding with other sports bettors.

Many students saw the financial risk of involvement as “worth it” because of the benefit of the exhilaration created by the entire betting process, including the

collection of data and the watching of the wagered game.

Ian, a 19-year-old sophomore, said, “I just love the rush. The feeling when I have a bet on a game, it’s the best feeling. It’s the time I feel like really exhilarated. I am so into it and I love the ups and downs of each game.”

An overwhelming majority of the students in the study were former high school athletes who not only had played interscholastic sports but also were enthusiastic sports fans and relished the opportunity to use their sports-specific knowledge in determining the odds.

Gavin, a 21-year-old junior, stated, “[It is] just that the skill piece of sports gambling makes it way different than buying a lottery ticket or playing slots. Students that are involved in sports gambling are not doing it by chance, they are making a conscious choice.”



Recognizing that they were spending a tremendous amount of time gathering information and watching bet games, the time spent interacting with other sports bettors was seen as an integral part of the sport bettor's social life.

Ethan, a 24-year-old senior, put it this way; "I may bet a game by myself, but I usually watch[ed] the games with my buddies. We [were] definitely closer because of gambling. We strategize[ed] together and help[ed] each other with justifications for why a team would win or lose."

### III. The Perspective

The third guidepost, "the perspective," is when the sports bettor begins to understand the level of their involvement, including the associated negative consequences. The students examined in the study clearly recognized that their involvement in sports gambling resulted in consequences that negatively impacted their relationships, health and finances. Gavin jeopardized his relationship with his parents by hiding his involvement. He stated, "For a while I was in pretty deep. I was in over my head financially and lied to my parents to get extra cash. I told them it was for a special class fee and some training manuals. They still don't know."

Ethan, who at the time of the study was \$15,000 in debt, detailed the financial difficulties created by betting on sports: "I was borrowing money from everybody and I did a few things that I am not proud

of. It was a one-time thing, but I helped with a pretty major drug deal. I helped a guy I knew from home get some drugs up here and then helped deliver to his clients. It only lasted a couple of weeks. I can't tell you how ashamed I am, but I was in deep trouble and that was the only way I knew to get out."

Hunter, a 20-year-old sophomore, developed health issues due to his involvement: "I just remember the one time when I finally went dead broke. I remember that I got all lightheaded and then my stomach would be all in knots for hours. Then I would wake up the next day and be like, 'Did that really happen.' I went to the doctor because of my stress; I was having a lot of problems. I [went] on medication, it was so bad."

Eleven of the 14 students in the study began to wager more frequently, at higher amounts, on more games and on more sports over the course of their involvement.

Jacob, a 22-year-old senior, initially bet \$5 to \$10 on a weekly parlay card and \$20 annually on the NCAA tournament. At the time of the interview, however, Jacob's words illustrated this type of progression. "I usually bet a minimum of \$100 per game. Up to three or four [hundred]. I bet almost every NFL game and probably 10 to 15 college [football] games a weekend. I also bet a lot of college hoops, probably 20 games a week."

In addition to the negative consequences, the students openly admitted that laws or institutional policies did not deter them from illegally betting on sports. Marcus, a 22-year-old junior, said, "I [knew] that betting on games [was] technically illegal, but I [didn't] really know what the law [said]. They say it is illegal, but whatever; those laws are not really followed by anybody and surely not enforced by the police."

Ethan, speaking on the lack of concern for sports gambling at his university said, "They are more worried about drunk drivers, loud parties and rapes than kids betting on their favorite teams."

### IV. The Next Step

The fourth and final guidepost is "the next step," or how the students foresaw their future participation in sports gambling. All of the students expected to continue to wager on sports after graduating from college, although at a reduced rate due to the time constraints of having a "real job" or professional career. Numerous students thought new Internet gambling laws would slow online wagering but would increase betting traffic with illegal bookmakers.

The students who ran bookmaking operations clearly understood that it is the "house" that profits from sports gambling, and they thought of their involvement as a business opportunity. Ferris, who made \$1,000 to \$1,500 weekly with his parlay





As Ferris said, “I got 100 customers and could have 300 if I wanted them...and keep in mind, I am just one of numerous bookies on or near campus.”

card operation, said, “The cool part for me is the business part. How do I get money bet in the right spots, how do I collect, how do I get new clients? It is to the point that if I have done a good job during the week, it doesn’t matter what happens in the games themselves. I just pay out, collect and put the juice in the bank...the downside is the games have kinda become the product of my business. I don’t have a passion for sports like I used to. But, I think that I am ready to run my own business – this is kinda like an internship I guess.”

Jacob, who also morphed from the bettor to the bookie/businessman and was up more than \$30,000 as the result of his operation, said, “What is a little scary is that I [became] more and more emotionless. It’s not that I don’t care – it’s my money – but it’s like I [became] removed from the bet. I analyze[d] the game for what it [became] – a way to gather info for the next bet...the key is to use every game to help to figure out the next one.”

## V. Implications for Policy and Practice

So, the big question is: What does this all mean? First, although this was a small, qualitative study, it gives us a clearer picture of the “typical” college-aged sports gambler. He is a male who was introduced to gambling by his father or male friends. While he initially believed he could benefit financially, he comes to thrive on the excitement of the bet, the ability to use sports knowledge

and the bonding with other bettors. He moved from socially acceptable bets to wagering online or with a bookie and advanced from a few bets on college and pro football and college basketball to numerous wagers, at higher amounts, on a variety of sports. He continues to participate even though he knows it is illegal and even though his finances, relationships and academics have suffered. He will continue to gamble after graduating from college.

Secondly, these stories highlight a tremendous need for educational programming informing people about the facts specifically related to wagering on sports, not only on college campuses, but also in middle schools and high schools. These programs should highlight the reasons people participate, warning signs of involvement, an explanation of current law and institutional policy, and consequences of participation.

Particular focus should be placed on at-risk student populations like freshmen, student-athletes and fraternity members. Parents should also be included in these programs during orientations, as this study has indicated the importance of their influence on gambling involvement.

In addition, college and university faculty, staff and administrators should be made aware of the prevalence of sports gambling on their campuses and the negative effects it is having on their students, including those students using their equipment and facilities to bet or run bookmaking operations.



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