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Mind, Body and Sport: Gambling among student-athletes

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AN EXCERPT FROM THE SPORT SCIENCE INSTITUTE'S GUIDE TO UNDERSTANDING AND SUPPORTING STUDENT-ATHLETE MENTAL WELLNESS

By Jeffrey L. Derevensky and Tom Paskus

Gambling remains one of the fastest-growing industries in the world, with multinational corporations investing billions of dollars to attract customers. While age restrictions exist in most jurisdictions (the age often is dependent upon the type of gambling), it is an activity in which many colleges students participate.

Most individuals gamble legally, occasionally and in a generally responsible manner (that is, setting and maintaining time and money limits). However, for a small but identifiable subset of youth, gambling can quickly escalate out of control and affect both psychological and physical well-being.

Excessive, problematic or pathological gambling has been repeatedly shown to result in consequences that can include deviant anti-social behaviors, decreased academic performance, impaired athletics performance, and criminal and legal problems.

Generally, the social and problem gambling experiences of college student-athletes are similar to those of other youth gamblers. Results of a 2012 study that the NCAA commissioned found that 57 percent of male student-athletes and 39 percent of female student-athletes reported gambling in some form during the past year, with those student-athletes in Division I reporting the lowest incidence of gambling (50 percent for males; 30 percent for females).

While pathological gambling is a problem that affects relatively few student-athletes, it is nonetheless a persistent health concern for some individuals: 1.9 percent of males and 0.2 percent of female student-athletes are exhibiting some clinical signs of problem gambling, placing them at extremely high risk for mental health issues.

One notable difference between student-athletes and their peers is that student-athletes tend to be drawn to sports wagering at higher rates. This is not surprising, given their background and interest in sports. However, for student-athletes, wagering on sports can have negative consequences even if the behavior is not classified as excessive or pathological.

To protect the integrity of college athletics contests, NCAA regulations prohibit student-athletes from betting money on any sporting event (college, professional or otherwise) in which the NCAA conducts collegiate championships. Violations of this regulation can result in a student-athlete losing his or her athletics eligibility, which has clear negative repercussions for the individual and his or her team.

Despite NCAA regulations prohibiting sports wagering for money, 26 percent of male student-athletes report doing just that, with 8 percent gambling on sports at least monthly. Of particular concern is the culture surrounding golf, where on-course wagering is considered a normative aspect of the experience. Males who participate in NCAA golf are approximately three times more likely to wager on sports (or engage in other gambling behaviors) than other student-athletes.

While most student-athlete sports wagering occurs solely among friends and teammates, many are now placing bets with online sites or

using bookmakers they can access easily via their smartphone. Technology is also allowing outside gamblers seeking “inside” betting information easier access to college student-athletes (for example, through social media). Nearly 1 in 20 Division I men’s basketball student-athletes in the 2012 study reported having been contacted for such inside information.

Unlike other more publicized addictive behaviors (for example, alcohol, drug abuse, tobacco consumption), gambling problems often go undetected. It is important that student-athletes and athletics personnel understand that a gambling problem parallels other addictive behaviors. Helping student-athletes with a gambling disorder requires education, early assessment, an acknowledgment of a potential problem and effective referrals into the mental health care system.

The ability to identify the college-age problem gambler may be more difficult today because more of it is occurring online. But two-thirds of student-athletes believe that teammates are aware when a member of the team is gambling. They also report that the coach has a strong influence on tolerance for gambling behaviors and for empowering members of the team to intervene when a teammate needs help. Athletics departmental personnel, including athletic trainers and coaches, are in a unique position to observe and interact with student-athletes on a daily basis and help refer student-athletes for the appropriate assistance should such a need arise.

Gambling behaviors among male student-athletes

	2004 Study		2008 Study		2012 Study	
	Past Year	1/month +	Past Year	1/month +	Past Year	1/month +
Played cards for money	46.8%	20.6%	45.9%	14.3%	27.4%	6.1%
Bet horses, dogs	9.8%	2.0%	8.5%	1.4%	6.5%	1.5%
Games of personal skill	39.7%	16.3%	33.1%	13.0%	25.4%	9.9%
Dice, craps	13.4%	4.3%	11.7%	3.9%	7.8%	2.5%
Slots	19.8%	3.6%	15.1%	2.0%	11.9%	1.8%
Lottery tickets	36.2%	11.1%	31.4%	9.1%	35.2%	11.1%
Played stock market	10.2%	4.7%	9.2%	4.5%	7.4%	3.6%
Commercial bingo	6.5%	0.9%	6.9%	1.1%	5.3%	1.2%
Gambled in casino	–	–	22.9%	3.8%	18.7%	3.3%
Bet on sports	23.5%	9.6%	29.5%	9.6%	25.7%	8.3%
Casino games on Internet for money	6.8%	2.8%	12.3%	4.7%	7.5%	1.9%

Percentages displayed are cumulative rather than independent. A student-athlete reporting having wagered “once/month or more” is also included in the “past year” figure.

Gambling behaviors among female student-athletes

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	2004 Study		2008 Study		2012 Study	
	Past Year	1/month +	Past Year	1/month +	Past Year	1/month +
Played cards for money	19.0%	4.4%	10.7%	1.3%	5.3%	0.6%
Bet horses, dogs	4.8%	0.4%	3.2%	0.1%	2.8%	0.2%
Games of personal skill	14.1%	3.2%	7.2%	1.2%	4.0%	0.7%
Dice, craps	3.5%	0.7%	2.2%	0.3%	2.0%	0.3%
Slots	14.3%	1.3%	9.9%	0.5%	8.4%	0.6%
Lottery tickets	29.7%	5.4%	24.0%	3.5%	30.5%	5.1%
Played stock market	3.5%	1.3%	2.1%	0.6%	1.1%	0.4%
Commercial bingo	7.3%	0.8%	6.8%	0.8%	6.2%	0.8%
Gambled in casino	--	--	11.0%	0.6%	9.4%	0.6%
Bet on sports	6.7%	1.5%	6.6%	0.8%	5.2%	0.6%
Casino games on Internet for money	2.1%	0.8%	1.9%	0.2%	1.8%	0.3%

Percentages displayed are cumulative rather than independent. A student-athlete reporting having wagered "once/month or more" is also included in the "past year" figure.

Q&A with Jeff Derevensky

When it comes to understanding the effects of gambling behavior on student-athletes (or the population in general), few people are more knowledgeable than Jeff Derevensky, the director of the International Center for Youth Gambling Problems and High-Risk Behaviors at McGill University in Montreal.

Following is a Q&A that probes Derevensky's insights on gambling behaviors.

Question: What are the most alarming trends you've seen to date?

Jeff Derevensky: There are several. Perhaps the one from which all others emerge is the global normalization of the behavior. The gambling industry has done a terrific job in that regard – they don't even call themselves gambling anymore. Now it's "gaming." They're selling entertainment. They've gotten away from the sin-and-vice image that had been associated with gambling to where it's now a normal socially acceptable behavior. TV also has done a remarkable job advertising gambling, not just through sports but through poker tournaments. ESPN has been able to develop inexpensive programming along those lines that has attracted millions of people. The electronic forms of gambling have made it accessible to the average person 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Even the government is in on the act, supporting lotteries as an easy kind of "voluntary taxation."

Self-reported personal beliefs of student-athletes about sports wagering

(all divisions, among student-athletes who reported wagering on sports in the last year)

2012 study	Males	Females
Most athletes in college violate NCAA sports-wagering rules	59%	48%
Wagering is acceptable as long as you don't wager on your own sport	57%	41%
Coaches see wagering as acceptable as long as you don't bet on your own games	41%	26%
Athletes and coaches take NCAA sports-wagering rules seriously	62%	68%
I think sports wagering is a harmless pastime	68%	58%
People can consistently make a lot of money gambling	59%	49%

Q: What about other trends and concerns?

JD: The landscape has changed dramatically. There are more states with casinos than ever before. When the NCAA initiated its first gambling task force in 2003, only Nevada and New Jersey had casinos. Now there are plenty of casinos in Florida, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia, Louisiana and many other states. Also, electronic forms of gambling are becoming increasingly popular. In 2003, very few people even thought of gambling online. Now you can wager virtually on anything online. There were odds on what Prince William and Kate Middleton were going to name their baby. You can gamble on who's going to be the next pope, or the next president. There were odds on where Angelina Jolie would adopt her next child from. In that vein, there is now live in-game betting – odds generated in real time for participants to bet on various aspects of a game as it unfolds. About 10 percent of male student-athletes in the 2012 study who wager on sports have engaged in live in-game betting. "Spot fixing" is another one. Spot fixing is just a single midgame event or portion of a contest needing to be fixed for a bet to pay off. It's generally seen as easier to do and harder to detect than manipulating a final outcome.

Q: What about the technology? Has gambling through social media become pervasive?

JD: Simulated forms of gambling – often referred to as "practice sites" – that's the new phenomenon. We currently don't know if there's a causal relationship between simulated forms of gambling (for virtual currency) and actual gambling. We do know, however, that as simulated gambling goes up, so does actual gambling and gambling-related problems.

Percentage of student-athletes reporting that they played simulated gambling activities in the past year

	Males	Females
Played activity via video game console	18.2%	4.8%
Played activity via social media website	12.0%	4.2%
Played activity via Internet gambling site	10.3%	2.4%
Played activity on a cell phone	14.5%	5.4%
Played a free sports-betting or bracket game online	11.7%	2.2%

Q: What do you mean by simulated forms of gambling?

JD: If you play a simulated form of gambling online, such as virtual slots or fantasy sports or filling out brackets for "virtual money," it hasn't been proven that it will prompt you to gamble for real money. But the link is rather intuitive, isn't it? Playing for "fun" or the "social media-type" games often have greater payouts than the real-money games do. So if you're playing these games and you're winning all

this virtual money, the natural thought is that, gee, if I had only been playing for real money, look how much I would have made. One of the most frightening findings we've recently found in terms of motivation for gambling is that children, teens and even young adults are gambling either for virtual or real money to relieve boredom. It's just a click away.

Q: How do audiences accept you when you're presenting around the world?

JD: These days, the most receptive crowd is the industry itself. Years ago, I gave a talk to the Internet gambling industry and they regarded me as a pariah. Somebody in the audience emailed me afterward in fact and said that while it was an interesting presentation, why was I walking back and forth across the stage so much? I answered, "It's harder to hit a moving target." Now, the industry is looking at "responsible gaming." They are concerned about keeping players safe; making sure that people don't lose their homes, drop out of school, get involved in illegal behaviors or commit suicide because they're overwhelmed by their gambling problems. Nobody wants that.

Q: What about the reception from colleges and universities?

JD: It's a little more under the radar at the collegiate level. Most people are more familiar with drug and alcohol issues and violence on campus. But gambling is just like alcohol. While it's a normalized behavior – for example, with drinking, the message is "as long as you're old enough and you drink responsibly, then you're OK." But you can't become an alcoholic if you don't start drinking. And you can't become a problem gambler if you don't start gambling. At the youth level, authorities talk with young people about drinking, but not about gambling. We do need more prevention, education, awareness and treatment programs for our youth and their parents.

Q: What's your advice for colleges and universities now?

JD: First of all, don't ignore it. Does it affect, or is it harmful to, the majority of your student population? Probably not. But is it negatively affecting at least some of your students? Absolutely. I was with a university president once whose school had collected research on gambling behaviors on campus, but he said he wasn't going to release the results. I asked him why, and he said he couldn't trust "gambling researchers" because they would make a big deal of three people out of 5,000 having a problem. I said I understood, but I added that by not releasing the findings, people think you've got something to hide. That convinced him to be more transparent. Just like most campuses have policies on drugs and alcohol, they need a policy on gambling.

Q: What is a good way to spot problem gambling behavior?

JD: It's difficult to do, because not many problem gamblers are open about their situation. But if you notice someone who maybe talks a lot about gambling or is pretty secretive about where he's going, then that's a clue. Also, problem gamblers become consumed with the behavior, and everything else tends to slide. If someone who had been doing well in class begins to let his or her grades slip, or if a usually outgoing person becomes reclusive, and of course if that person starts having financial trouble, then problematic gambling might be at the root of those behaviors.

Q: Are there approaches on campus that are known to work?

JD: Student-athletes report that coaches and teammates are their primary influences, so programs targeting those people – particularly coaches – are helpful. I like the idea of involving student services groups as well. The more campus-wide involvement, the better. This is a more general student issue, and not one that affects only student-athletes. It's important to understand that what starts off as a fun, harmless activity can lead to other serious problems. One or two out of 100 college students having a problem isn't likely to set the world on fire, but if you approach the gambling issue as being among a number of things that can negatively impact student health and well-being, then your odds of resonating, so to speak, are much greater. It's important to remember that every problem gambler tends to seriously impact a dozen other people: boyfriends, girlfriends, peers, teammates, coaches, parents and employers. And for student-athletes, it can jeopardize their eligibility.

Most effective ways to influence student-athletes not to wager on sports

(as reported by student-athletes who have wagered on sports in the past year)

Rank	Males	Females
1	Coach	Teammates
2	Teammates	NCAA penalties
3	NCAA penalties	Coach
4	Pro athlete presentation	Pro athlete presentation
5	Parents	Law enforcement presentation
6	Athletics department info	Athletics department info

Jeff Derevensky is the director of the International Center for Youth Gambling Problems and High-Risk Behaviors at McGill University in Montreal. The National Center for Responsible Gaming recently honored Derevensky with its coveted Scientific Achievement Award, one of dozens of accolades he has earned from his research over time. He and NCAA Principal Scientist Tom Paskus co-authored the 2008 and 2012 NCAA studies on student-athlete wagering behaviors.

Tom Paskus is the principal research scientist for the NCAA. In this role, he directs the NCAA's national portfolio of studies on the academic trajectories of college student-athletes and oversees the NCAA's data collections and research initiatives pertaining to the academic, athletic, social, and personal well-being of current and former student-athletes. Before joining the NCAA, Paskus was a faculty member in the quantitative research methods program in the College of Education at the University of Denver. He received his Ph.D. and M.A. in quantitative psychology from the University of Virginia, and an A.B. in psychology from Dartmouth College.

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