

Wanna Bet?

Student-athletes and gambling don't mix

BY ROBERT MANKER

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A \$5 BET HERE, A \$20 WAGER THERE. Just putting a little money where your mouth is. That's what college sports are all about, right? Not to the NCAA, and definitely not if you're a student-athlete.

The U. of Maryland athletic department learned that lesson the hard way this summer when five Terrapin athletes were suspended for alleged gambling violations. Among them were football quarterback Scott Milanovich, a preseason All-American, and Matt Raydo, a reserve basketball player.

Milanovich, who bet just \$200 over a three-year span and placed no bets on his own team, was originally suspended for the first eight of his team's 11 games. The suspension was appealed and reduced to four games. Raydo was disqualified for the first 20 of his team's 27 contests. His case is currently under appeal.

The suspensions are believed to be the harshest sanctions for gambling ever doled out by the NCAA to Division I athletes. And NCAA officials say their message is clear: Gambling on college sports by student-athletes will not be tolerated.

It's everywhere

The Maryland athletes are the 19th group suspended by the NCAA for gambling violations since January 1990. Most of the cases involved athletes betting on football or basketball.

"NCAA legislation prohibits college athletes from gambling on any intercollegiate athletic contest," says Dirk Taitt, NCAA enforcement representative. The sport, the school and the amount of money don't matter, he says.

Upon joining their teams, athletes sign contracts promising not to engage in such activity, and yet it happens — often.

Since 1992, illegal sports-gambling operations have been uncovered at Michigan State U., U. of Maine, U. of Rhode Island, U. of Texas, Arizona State U., Northwestern U. and Bryant College (R.I.). At least five of these cases involved student-athletes.

"I'd have to say it's campuswide," says Albert,* a U. of Florida junior and sports gambler. "I know [campus] organizations that are extremely wrapped up in it. It's like an everyday thing — like 'What'd you have for dinner?' 'Who'd you put money on?'"

A cause for concern

Student welfare and the integrity of the competitions, Taitt says, are what the NCAA is trying to protect.

"A student-athlete is particularly vulnerable," he says. "Once you're sufficiently indebted [with gambling losses] or addicted [to gambling], you're a prime target for organized gambling."

That is the ultimate fear — that student-athletes could be at the mercy of gamblers while on the courts and fields.

Once under the control of gamblers, athletes could be ordered to throw games or to shave points to yield a higher payoff for gamblers.



Meanwhile, fans may begin to question the honesty of each play. "Was the dropped pass or the missed layup a mistake, or was something going on? The fact that that could enter the fan's thought process demonstrates part of the problem," Taitt says.

No easy answer

It's been said many times — sports are big business. Not also in college, but especially in college. The folks at the NCAA know there's a problem. They just don't know how to fix it.

"With the amount of money bet each year on the NCAA [men's basketball] tournament, we'd be remiss not to address those numbers and notice what's going on out there," Taitt says. "A total of \$2.5 billion is bet on the NCAA tournament every year, half of which is illegal. But there are jurisdictional questions about what we have the authority to do."

The problem is further complicated by campus environments in which rampant gambling activity among non-athletes often goes unnoticed and unpunished.

Henry Lesieur is the criminal law chair at Illinois State U. and one of the few scholars to research the topic. His study of six schools — private and public — revealed that 23 percent of students gamble at least once a week and that about 5.5 percent could be considered pathological gamblers.

"College students today are growing up in an era in which gambling is acceptable," he says. "It's about as impossible to control as marijuana consumption or underage drinking."

With student-run gambling operations on so many campuses, insulating student-athletes from gambling seems impossible. This leaves the NCAA and school administrators with a formidable task: drafting and enforcing strict guidelines to preserve the integrity of the games.

"The NCAA views student-athlete involvement in gambling situations as a serious issue," says Carrie Doyle, NCAA director of eligibility.

But you must wonder *how* seriously NCAA officials view it and how the agency plans to control it.

Playing with the big boys

The NCAA says the severity of Milanovich's original suspension was justified because he had bet with off-campus bookmakers. The suspension was reduced, Doyle says, because the NCAA discovered he wasn't part of an organized-gambling operation.

The NCAA insists on making a distinction between on- and off-campus betting operations. The reasoning is that the non-students, as "professional" bookmakers, pose more of a threat than students, who are considered amateurs. Student gamblers say such thinking ignores the scope of the problem.

"It's on campus, and students know what they're doing," says Donald,* a senior and sports bettor at James Madison U. "And until people realize that and deal with it, it's not gonna go away."

**The sports gamblers interviewed for this story agreed to talk only on the condition that their identities be protected.*

Robert Manker, Assistant Editor, spends his lonely Saturday nights at the track — the ponies and a stiff drink his only companions.

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DIRK TAITT, NCAA ENFORCEMENT REPRESENTATIVE