

Does football have a gambling problem that is out of control?

Gambling and football are inextricably linked, and it provides society with a moral conundrum, sparking controversy for its dangers versus its addictive nature that millions in the UK enjoy playing. Whilst gambling is a problem in all sports, 70% of all sports bets are from football (Carling, 2017) owing to its ability to build fame fast and establish credibility with the brands that sponsor the game that in turn reaches the largest consumer base of any sport. Since the Gambling Act of 2005, which opened the door for gambling advertising on TV, betting companies have had a direct access into people's homes through apps and online casinos. Consequently, in 2017 it was reported that the betting industry brought in over £14bn a year (Davies, 2017) with football bets accounting for £1.4b of this in 2016. (Jewell, 2017). In the UK there is an estimated 400,000 problem gamblers with 1.8 million more said to be impacted by gambling harm and consequences (Frostick, 2021), making sports relationship with gambling a contentious social issue. In this essay I will argue that footballs relationship with gambling is out of control, and cite modern accessibility, lucrative sponsorship deals, and lack of awareness that gambling is a medical addiction as reasons why. Using examples such as ex-Arsenal player Paul Merson's own gambling journey, and the FA's mixed messaging when it comes to player welfare, I will showcase that "any sport on which bets can be placed is open to corruption" (Forrest, 2012) but show that the problem within football is notably more dangerous. Ultimately, footballs gambling problem is out of control and the only way forward to protect both society and the legitimacy of the sport is to implement tighter reforms and restrictions.

A key factor to consider when analysing footballs relationship with gambling culture is how in the last decade an increase in the accessibility of betting has escalated the problem within the sport. The digital age has been key for millions gaining easy access into gambling and has resulted in the proliferation of betting sites, apps, brands, and new users. Technology advancements, in particular the widespread use of smart phones, now allows for anyone to

place a bet at anytime, from anywhere in the world with the click of a button. Theorists such as King et al. (2010) argue that “adolescents’ use of the Internet and other digital media for the purpose of gambling represents a serious concern in modern society”, citing how modern accessibility has attracted a whole new demographic of people that would have previously never bet on football matches, and the rise in young gamblers is a concern. In addition to this, there are also concerns about the cross-selling of gambling, where betting companies entice individuals already betting on football, to bet on other sports or try out other products of their brand such as online casinos or roulette games that typically lose fans more money and carry higher rates of addiction. This is a well-known tactic of betting companies to increase their number of players and make them a larger profit, and questions remain over the ethics of this gambling promotion. Ultimately, increased accessibility to gambling in the internet age has equated to an increase in the normalisation of football betting, resulting in more sufferers of the addiction not being able to seek the help that they need and therefore aiding footballs out of control gambling problem.

Arguably, the biggest reason for the rise in football gambling over the last decade is due to the increase in large sponsorship deals between clubs and betting companies that has become normalised through TV advertising. Gambling offers the ability to raise awareness of a particular brand and has the power to make a brand credible. The largest betting companies in the UK, Bet365 and Paddy Power for example, hope to get their messaging out to large TV audiences tuning into watch their team, and there is no better way to reach this audience than through football sponsorship, especially shirt sponsorship. The Guardian reports that 26/44 top English teams have a gambling logo on their chest as of 2020 yet 1/3 of sports fans said they would be put off buying their team shirt if the logo was on the front of the shirt (Davies, 2020). Exposure to “gambling promotions during televised sport may encourage gambling intentions” (Hing et al, 2013) and one clear example of football exploiting this is when Wayne Rooney returned to the UK to join Derby in 2017. A record-breaking shirt sponsorship deal was agreed between Derby and betting company 32Red which would help the club pay Rooney’s staggering wage, and coincidentally Rooney’s shirt number was also 32. This allowed the club to exploit a gambling law loophole that would

hinder shirt sales to children due to the gambling logo appearing on the chest of the shirt. Now shirts sold with Rooney's number on the back is giving 32Red free advertising and deceiving fans into promoting gambling (Jewell, 2019). This is a sign of the commercial power of football and highlights how gambling companies promoting their brand through sponsorship that appears on TV leads to the "normalisation of gambling culture" sometimes known as "gamblification" (Djohari et al., 2019). Ultimately, if football was serious about tackling gambling and creating a safer betting culture within the sport, there would be limitations in place for on-screen gambling sponsorships and restrictions on the visibility of betting brands to fans. Therefore, as football relies more and more on gambling sponsorships as a source of income, it becomes clear that betting companies have an unprecedented influence over sports fans, and ultimately, the relationship between gambling and football is out of control.

Another reason that football's gambling problem is out of control is due to its lack of support for player welfare to those suffering from the addiction within the game. Research shows that professional footballers are more than three times more likely to have gambling problems than individuals outside the game and in the last two years over 150 footballers from the Premier League and EFL have undergone treatment for a gambling addiction (Sky Sports, 2022). With numbers this high, and with big money circulating through these leagues, many question why the FA has not done more to tackle this problem and put more support in place for players who are struggling on and off the pitch due to gambling. Lim et al (2017) studied 12 professional footballers who had sought help for a gambling addiction whilst playing football in the EFL and found that in all cases their gambling addiction was linked to other psychological problems such as "depression, anxiety, alcohol misuse and addictions" (Hughes & Leavey, 2012). This highlights that consequences of gambling for players goes beyond the financial, affecting their game play, family life, and mental health. A high-profile example of lack of player welfare accelerating gambling in football is ex-Arsenal player Paul Merson. Merson lost £7m during his career through gambling addiction and cost him relationships with his family and friends. During a tell-all interview with his employer, Sky Sports (2022), he stated "You're not gambling for the money, it's just for the buzz",

going on to insist addiction to gambling significantly dents a player's performance despite it not having the same physical effects as other vices such as alcoholism or drug use.

Ultimately, Merson believes that football needs to step up and "do more to stop players falling prey" to gambling problems and cites the FA as the institution to start this catalyst for support and change to hold gambling companies accountable for their irresponsible promotions and relationships with sport. The FA however has consistently peddled the narrative that gambling is a choice and players will be penalised for betting rather than given the support to access the help they need to overcome the addiction. For example, Joey Barton was given a career-ending ban for his gambling activity despite publicly stating he was struggling with controlling his betting compulsions and was looking to seek medical help to get his life back on track (Sharman, 2022). The FA did not however penalise the consecutive clubs Barton played for at this time (Rangers and Burnley) whose biggest sponsors were gambling companies highlighting the lack of awareness for player welfare. Therefore, until football puts the wellbeing of its players who are openly suffering with a gambling addiction before its profits, it will always be increasingly hard for players to access support and player welfare will continue to be neglected as football's gambling problem spirals further out of control.

When looking at football's relationship with gambling in a historical context it cannot be overstated how gambling has only in the last few decades impacted wider society in such a negative way and the problem has spiralled further out of control in the last three years due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic proved to be highly beneficial for betting companies as isolation, lockdowns and cancelled sports events led to an increase in time spent online globally and ultimately this altered previously controlled and stable gambling patterns across society. For football clubs also, the need to find extra avenues of income to make up for the financial losses of losing ticket sales and money from televised games resulted in football encouraging these addictive gambling habits through an increase in sponsorships and gambling advertisements on mobile. However, studies show that "Covid-19 has created a mental health crisis" (Brodeur et al, 2021) especially among younger generations who are disproportionately suffering from depression, anxiety, and

“enhanced addictive behaviours including a risk of increased problematic online gaming” (Håkansson, 2020) which highlights how the number of dangerous gamblers has grown in the last few years. Whilst gambling has historically been viewed as a “socially deviant activity” (Abt et al, 2009), the positive difference since the pandemic has been that gambling has started to be analysed and diagnosed in the same way other medical problems such as drug use or alcoholism is. For example, the NHS in 2019 opened up a clinic to help young people who are addicted to gambling and reports show that there are 55,000 11-16 year olds in the UK who are currently using this service to get the support they need to curb their dangerous gambling habits (Milligan, 2019). Ultimately, awareness that gambling is a real addiction and should be treated medically is growing in social discourse and more young people can access the treatment they need. However, this has been a direct response to the irresponsible actions of football and gambling companies exploiting our changed lived experiences during Covid-19 and therefore football must take accountability for this spike in gambling numbers and acknowledge the problem is out of control.

The acknowledgment that gambling in football has become excessive and out of control is just the first step in addressing the issue. Ruth Davidson MP describes gambling’s relationship with football as a “parasite that's taking over the host” (Davies, 2021) and emphasises that reform is necessary to take back control of the industry and help save lives. Theorists suggest that an “environment is created where gambling needs football and football needs gambling” (Fiedler et al., 2019) and that this is exclusively an issue that effects football increasingly more than other sports. This highlights that until football can exist as a separate entity to gambling, fans will always be susceptible to the risk posed by the relationship. One such fan, Kimberley Wadsworth, tragically took her own life in 2018 after becoming a victim to the consequences of sports gambling after betting companies piled her with free bets, enticing her in to gamble away her life savings. "These harmful gambling products are designed to hook people in" (Mackinlay, 2022) and with sport gambling too accessible and promoted by such large clubs and individuals within football it becomes almost impossible to curb the problem without implementing reforms to save others like Kimberley. Research shows that there are between 250-650 gambling related

suicides in the UK every year, more than 50% higher than estimated a decade ago (Sky Sports, 2021). Friends and family of Kimberley Wadsworth are now directly questioning the FA and football clubs, urging them to reject big gambling sponsorships during a 40 mile walk between 5 local clubs in her honour. Tragedies like these are highlighting the need for change in the way gambling is governed in the sport and the beginning of real reforms to tackle excessive gambling in football are starting to be seen. Spain in 2020 announced that they were cracking down on pandemic gambling habits by introducing measures as a “social shield” to restrict the ability of gambling companies to advertise through mainstream channels (Sharman, 2022). Similarly, in UK, members of the Betting and Gaming Council agreed to a 10-point pledge during lockdown to encourage “safer” gambling (Betting & Gaming Council, 2020) by a voluntary reduction in gambling advertising on TV and radio. Whilst these reforms are a positive step in aiding and reducing problem gamblers in society, the sports industry, especially football, are yet to respond or implement their own measures. Football remains the largest percentage of all bets placed in the UK and therefore the recent reforms are not yet enough to suggest that football has its gambling issues under control.

To conclude, gambling’s relationship with football poses a moral conundrum to fans, players and clubs, and the problem is yet to be answered. In the digital age, gambling has become so accessible that it has encouraged a whole new generation of gamblers who would have previously never gone to the bookies to place a bet. In addition to this, increased exposure to betting companies via shirt sponsorship and other gambling advertisements that clubs promote for alternate income streams has become too normalised that it now has an unprecedented influence on its audiences who are constantly persuaded to bet their money away. This highlights how gambling in football culture takes advantage of its users as problem gamblers bring in the greatest revenue and therefore football has to figure out a way to protect player welfare and tackle excessive in-play gambling without impacting the finances of the game. However, with growing calls for tighter restrictions and more discourse surrounding the dangers of gambling within sports, it is clear that more reforms need to be implemented to reduce the influence that gambling can hold over people’s lives

and answer the ethical questions surrounding the influence of gambling on football. Ultimately, football and gambling are so intertwined within society that football no longer has the tools necessary to ensure the safety of gamblers, players, and the legitimacy of the sporting industry, and therefore football does have a gambling problem that is out of control.

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