

The Sports Page - Is The Fix In?

The Sports Page - Gambling in the World of Sport

Athletes Gambling in Professional Sports

In January 2004, Pete Rose, one of the greatest baseball players of the 20th century, finally admitted publicly that he had gambled on his sport and even his team while managing (coaching) the Cincinnati Reds in the American Major Leagues in 1987. This had led to his banishment from baseball for the last 14 years. During this time Rose constantly denied that fact he had gambled despite substantial evidence to the contrary. Debate now rages in the US whether Rose should be reinstated to baseball which would make him eligible for the Hall of Fame, and to take up employment with baseball teams.

Whilst this is one of the most debated examples of a player or coach gambling on their sport, it is not an isolated case. Many professional sports around the world are having to deal with gambling as an issue affecting their athletes. Sports popular in Australia are no exception.

Cricket has had its share of cases with Mark Waugh and Shane Warne involved with selling information to bookmakers in 1998 and the scandal involving South African Hansie Cronje. Former Australian Cricket Board CEO Graham Halbish has written about a gambling culture within the Australian team that involved casino gambling with 'play money' which led to their involvement with bookmakers.

The AFL has also recently been affected by gambling with the acknowledgement of two players from the Melbourne Football Club having substantial gambling debts, and claims that a gambling culture is present within some clubs including the existence of organised betting clubs.

More recently there have been claims of match rigging in mens professional tennis with the ATP warning of severe penalties for those involved.

There are a range of issues concerning gambling by players and officials on the sports they are involved in. Apart from the obvious issue of betting against yourself and throwing a match, with the wide range of betting options now available each and every decision made on and off the field may effect a wager. Patrick Fitzgerald on crikey.com.au makes the example of the Essendon Football Club hiding injuries to key players. He suggests that by not providing information openly to the media and public this effects gambling transactions putting those 'in the know' with a significant inside advantage over the general public.

There have even been claims (such as Tim Watson in The Age) that gambling is a necessary part of sport. He claims that the "world of the footballer is the world of the gambler" and more often than not it's a gamble on himself. Will he or won't he play the games required to achieve the bonus clause in his contract? Should he gamble on playing through an injury?

With gambling and professional sport being more interconnected than ever before, it seems to emphasise the need for effective policies by sporting bodies to combat gambling, and intensive and recurrent education of sportspeople in the dangers of gambling, both in terms of damage to the sport and themselves in terms of debts, damaged reputations, failed relationships and the effect on family and friends.

The AFL and Cricket Australia have recognised this with mandatory training for players and policies now in place that ensure those found gambling are subject to sanctions including fines and suspension and also a requirement to attend counselling.

However the greater presence of gambling in and around professional sports is indicative of the massive increase in gambling in the community. Whilst sports betting is not reported as a major problem by the majority of gamblers, it seems to be more of an issue for young men in the 18-25 age bracket, for whom sports often make up a major part of life. Prevention and early intervention seems to be the best approach to this growing problem and young people need to be educated about gambling. Until effective education occurs, potential gamblers will be persuaded by the ability to support their team and win money at the same time, without fully understand the risks and possible consequences. As gambling begins to pervade the media and become more and more acceptable to the general community this could only be the tip of the iceberg – the start of a destructive relationship with sports betting. Is the fix in? For gambling the fix is definitely not in yet.

Sources:

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