

# Sports betting scandals highlight knowledge gaps for gambling harm

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In recent months, high-profile scandals in North American professional sports have amplified concerns over how the legalization and expansion of sports betting has impacted the integrity of sport. In Major League Baseball (MLB), Los Angeles Dodgers player Shohei Ohtani's former interpreter has plead guilty to bank fraud for stealing nearly 17 million from Ohtani's bank account to finance illegal sports betting activities.<sup>1</sup> Ohtani denies any involvement in the scandal. In another case, Toronto Raptors forward Jontay Porter has been handed a lifetime ban by the National Basketball Association (NBA) for violating league gambling rules,<sup>2</sup> including disclosing confidential information to sports bettors and betting on NBA games. The investigation into Porter stemmed from irregularities surrounding so-called 'prop bets' on his individual statistics.

These cases exemplify the tensions around gambling in modern-day sports. Following the legalization of sports betting in the US (2018) and Canada (2021),<sup>3</sup> all major leagues in North America established partnerships with gambling brands. This marked a significant departure from a century-long stance against gambling connections that was largely predicated on concerns around sporting integrity—concerns that are currently being realized. Notably, the normalized culture of gambling among athletes might be a neglected contributor to a wider normalization of gambling in sports at a societal level.

## Athletes and problem gambling

Research has shown elevated rates of gambling problems among athletes across an array of sports, from high school extra-curricular sports and athletics to elite professionals.<sup>4</sup> Among elite athletes in Europe, 56.6% reported past-year gambling and 8.2% recorded gambling problems.<sup>5</sup> Remarkably, among those who gambled, 37% reported betting on their own sport. In a study with Portuguese athletes,<sup>6</sup> some questioned the premise that betting on their own matches

compromised sporting integrity, describing such betting as an expression of their motivation or rivalry that need not compromise integrity.

Why are athletes prone to gambling? Here, we must rely on educated speculation. Gambling is actively marketed and widely portrayed in sports.<sup>7</sup> Although this 'normalization' is often discussed in relation to youth involvement in gambling, it may also desensitize the athletes themselves to gambling-related risks. Athletes, at the eye of the storm, can be sponsored by gambling brands, wear teamstrips that feature gambling logos, and play in stadiums emblazoned with gambling advertisements, yet the athletes themselves are prohibited from gambling.

Athletes may also be susceptible to gambling due to financial struggles and instability. Even among world-class athletes, salaries are highly skewed, with many players on low and precarious incomes—an effect that is amplified at lower divisions and less popular sports.<sup>8</sup> *Relative deprivation* is a trait in which social comparison drives a sense of financial inadequacy and is linked to disordered gambling.<sup>9</sup> The combination of low incomes, intense stress and training pressure, and a perceived need to "keep up with the Joneses" (i.e., teammates earning higher salaries or enjoying greater recognition) may fuel risky financial behaviours.

Another factor at play may be high self-efficacy, a mindset that is nurtured among athletes, characterized by a strong belief in one's ability to overcome adversity.<sup>10</sup> This mentality, essential for thriving in competitive sports, fosters resilience, determination, and a willingness to push boundaries to achieve success. Applied to gambling, this mindset may drive loss-chasing and an illusion of control among athletes—both hallmarks of disordered gambling.

## Preventing competition manipulation in modern-day sports

In referencing sporting integrity, the specific concern is termed 'competition manipulation': the deliberate influence of a sporting contest, usually for financial gain, and often associated with gambling and organized crime (i.e. match-fixing).<sup>11</sup> The factors that drive competition manipulation and gambling-related harm among athletes are intertwined: athletes drawn to gambling are susceptible to pressure from external influences. Besides simple prohibitions on athlete gambling,

The Lancet Regional Health - Americas 2024;38: 100879

Published Online xxx  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lana.2024.100879>

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educational programs directed at athletes must raise awareness about gambling harm, and how to recognise and resist pressure to alter matches. With the globalization of online gambling and sports betting, governments must embrace international treaties to police competition manipulation, such as frameworks from the International Olympic Committee and the Council of Europe's Macolin Convention.<sup>11</sup> In supporting research on this topic, as well as governmental funding (given the revenues from legalized gambling), sports leagues and sports broadcasters should also recognize their involvement and duty of care; for example in monitoring gambling harms, sharing data, and promoting athletes' involvement in independent research. With around three-quarters of youth and one-quarter of adults engaging in sports,<sup>12</sup> athletes are role models to many and have a powerful role to play in countering the normalization of gambling in contemporary sport.

#### Contributors

LC: conceptualisation and writing. MW: conceptualisation and writing.

#### Declaration of interests

LC is the Director of the Centre for Gambling Research at UBC, which is supported by funding from the Province of British Columbia and the British Columbia Lottery Corporation (BCLC), a Canadian Crown Corporation. The Province of BC government and the BCLC had no role in the preparation of this article and impose no constraints on publishing. LC receives further grant funding from the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC) and the Canadian Institutes for Health Research (CIHR). LC has received remuneration from the International Center for Responsible Gaming (travel; speaker honoraria; academic services), the Institut für Glücksspiel und Gesellschaft (Germany; travel; speaker honoraria), GambleAware (UK; academic services), Gambling Research Australia (academic services), Alberta Gambling Research Institute (Canada; travel; academic services), German Foundation for Gambling Research (advisory board; travel and consultancy). He has been remunerated for legal consultancy by the BCLC. He has not received any further direct or indirect payments from the gambling industry or groups substantially funded by gambling. LC receives an honorarium for his role as Co-Editor-in-Chief for International Gambling Studies from Taylor & Francis, and he has received royalties from Cambridge Cognition Ltd. relating to neurocognitive testing.

In the last 36 months, MW has received research funding from International Center for Responsible Gaming (US), Massachusetts Gaming Commission (US), Canadian Society of Addiction Medicine (Canada), Institute for Humane Studies (US), Canadian Centre for

Substance Abuse and Addiction (US), Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (Canada). MW has received speaker/travel honorarium from Alberta Liquor Gaming Commission (Canada), Indiana Council on Problem Gambling (US); International Center for Responsible Gaming (US), National Association for Gambling Studies (Australia), Massachusetts Council on Compulsive Gambling (US), New York Council of Problem Gambling (US); Problem Gambling Ohio Network (US); Rhode Island Council on Problem Gambling (US); Safe Foundation (US); The Star Entertainment Group (Australia). MW has also received consulting fees from Aristocrat Gaming (US); Atlantic Lottery and Gaming Corporation (Canada), GamRes (Canada), Massachusetts Gaming Commission (US), National Council on Problem Gambling (Singapore), New South Wales Government (Australia), Nova Scotia Gaming Corporation (Canada), and Ontario Lottery and Gaming (Canada). Lastly, MW has worked with Massachusetts Gaming Commission on the transfer of data from gaming operators to the Massachusetts Gaming Commission.

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