

Season 2 Episode 7: Money Changes People

Katy Larkin: If you are engaging because you have school pride or you love that sport, you're not as angry when your team loses as you are when you've lost a lot of money.

Sara Gras: I'm Sara Gras and this is Episode 7 of Season 2 of Hearsay from the Sidelines, a show about the place where law, sports and culture intersect brought to you by Culture in Sports and Seton Hall Law School's Gaming, Hospitality, Entertainment and Sports Law program. This season is focused on the explosive growth of the online sports betting industry as legalization sweeps across the country and how it's impacting our relationships with our favorite past times.

So in addition to concerns about increased gambling harms and our ability to adequately address problem gambling behavior, the other objection to legal sports betting centers around gambling's impact on the culture of sports. But what does this mean, exactly? In part I think it comes down preserving the appearance of a "clean, healthy competition" as NFL commissioner Tagliabue emphasized in his remarks to Congress in support of PASPA. It's the need to maintain the integrity of the games. Back in the early 1990's, lawmakers and leagues were focused on keeping the dark underworld of illegal betting away from athletes and coaches, preventing match fixing and point shaving, avoiding scandals. No one was too concerned about protecting a bookie from inside information – they were on their own to worry about who was placing bets and whether that person knew something no one else did. But these days there's an additional concern that betting will influence, not just how games are played, but that players and other insiders may use first-hand knowledge to gain an unfair advantage in placing bets.

Of everyone I interviewed, no one had a deeper understanding of both how big this concern is and how vast the measures put in place to prevent integrity issues are than former IC360 CEO, Matt Holt. I asked Matt how developments in sports betting as increased legalization and the shift to largely online gaming, has changed attempts to "beat" the system

Matthew Holt: Dramatically shifted. I think what we would consider nefarious or illicit types of schemes today are very dramatically different than what we would have saw 20, 30, 40 years ago. If we go back to some of the more famous publicly adjudicated sports betting scandals, issues, schemes, whatever you want to call them, you know, the 1919 Chicago Black Sox, they even have their own name it's so famous. Boston College, Northwestern, Toledo, Headache Smith at Arizona State. These all involve multiple players on a team, all coordinating and collaborating together to fix a game or multiple games.

Whereas nowadays we very rarely see that. If we think of recent scandals with Jontay Porter in the NBA, the UFC issue we saw, Brad Bohannon, the head coach at Alabama.

It is significantly easier to go to one individual player and say, hey, I don't even need your team to lose. I don't need you to necessarily underperform. I need you to miss a free throw in the second quarter, or I need you to not hit this rebounding total for the game, or I need you to fumble the ball in the first half. So suddenly, you know, one individual can control it. The problem with match fixing historically was you needed a bunch of people or how could you be sure it would actually work out? Whereas now with the amount of dollars you can wager on individual player performance props or even little tiny microcosms of the event, it doesn't make any sense for a match fixer to try to coordinate and collaborate. It's five, six, seven, eight, ten players on a team. Go to one individual, you find a statistical category or a microcosm of the game that they can fully 100 % control. And now you either extort or, you know, financially bribe that individual to manipulate that portion of the game. And it is much easier to assure success.

And what we are seeing is people are using more more sophisticated means. And what we need to get to a point is the problem in the media is we saw basically a scandal every third day for two years. But to the point you brought up, many of them weren't necessarily illicit schemes or opportunities to try to manipulate outcomes but rather people betting on things that they're prohibited from betting on. We had 235 cases last year of prohibited bettors. And the word prohibited better, that term, means a lot of different things depending on the jurisdiction you're in, the sport you play, the league you participate. For the most part, the generic prohibited better language used by state regulators for regulated sports books is any person who plays - coaches, officiates, or is a person of influence over that sport cannot wager on that sport. And we've sort of been able to get regulators to agree that that or person of influence part should mean someone who either travels with the team or has locker room access to the team. So they're in the locker room. They know the game plan. They know who might be hurt, who's getting medical attention, and thus they wouldn't be able to use that information for scrupulous purposes by handing it out to inappropriate people or trying to profit through a regulated market. And then the second most common thing we've seen over the last year or two is the misuse of insider information. It still is one of the bigger problems. And it's no different than insider trading in the financial services world. You are using information that is not publicly available to anybody else to profit illicitly through a regulated market.

Sara Gras: So you've raised a couple times and you're not the first person that I've spoken to to kind of bring up the parallels between sports betting and the financial services industry. Can you just, do you have any thoughts on what sort of lessons the sports betting

industry or in what ways the sports betting industry can perhaps avoid some of the missteps of the financial services industry as it sort of rapidly expands in this very decentralized way, which is kind of very different from financial services.

Matthew Holt: So I think you're right. While there's a lot of sort of very similar aspects of financial services and sports betting, even the names of a lot of positions within the companies, risk managers and traders, they all sort of have the similar job titles and positions and roles.

You know, what we have seen is, and in the last few years since PASPA was repealed in May 14, 2018, is that when done responsibly, sports betting is the greatest engagement tool, customer acquisition tool that sports has ever had. There are studies out there that show people are 20 times more likely to watch an event that they have a wager on than one that they don't, even if that wager is as small as \$5 - just the fact that they are engaged, impacted, and financially incentivized by the outcome of that event, they are so much more likely to watch that event than if they don't. But we have to remember what we learned from financial services. When things are going smooth, when they're scandal free, when there's a lot of free trade going in and out of the markets, then there's a lot of public interest and participation in financial services. We see the general public take a little money out of the shoe box in their closet and a little out of the savings account and now say, I'm going to participate in this activity. I'm going to invest in some stocks. It not only looks interesting and not only looks fun, but there's potential for some profit through some hard work.

And sports betting is very similar. You know, people that participate in it tend to have fun when done responsibly, when things are going good and we're not seeing match fixing scandals, misuse of insider information scandals, prohibited betting scandals every day, then people are more confident to risk their wagers on games. But what we have seen in financial services, going back to like Enron and some of the big scandals, is when big scandals happen in financial services, people tend to pull their money out, put it back in the shoe box, put it on that CD instead, stick it in the savings account because they always need that security and that feeling of this is a fair game. This is a fair and equitable market. And if I'm going to take my hard earned dollars and participate, I have to know that I have a fair chance. And I think it's the same thing with sports betting. We need to make sure we continue to be fully committed on all sides, regulators, operators, college sports, pro sports, to the integrity of the game, that we continue to collaborate, iterate on regulations and laws so that they're updated and make sense, make sure that the integrity, independent integrity monitors have access to the appropriate amounts of data in real time, that they need to do this, so that when people watch sports, they know it's best on best, and now I feel comfortable engaging with and putting my money into sports betting.

Otherwise, I think, you know, Wall Street's taught us a lot of lessons. When it's scandal free and going good, America loves to participate. But when those scandals happen, everyone puts their money back in the shoe box in the closet.

Sara Gras: Sports as entertainment derives value and meaning from the unscripted, unpredictable nature of competition – the feeling that “anything could happen” and no one has an unearned advantage. This is also what makes gambling so appealing – it’s a game of chance and everyone’s chance is the same whether you throw \$5 into the pot or \$5000. But if a critical mass of fans, bettors, players - any stakeholders really – believe the fix is in, the fun stops. That doesn’t mean no one ever gets caught cheating. In fact, catching cheaters is an important part of this system – it signals that there are mechanisms in place to maintain integrity and that they are working as intended.

Matt founded U.S. Integrity, which merged with regulatory consulting firm, Odds on Compliance to become IC360, shortly before *Murphy* was decided. It quickly became a vital player while the U.S. sports betting industry was still in its infancy. The company played a role in uncovering some huge sports betting scandals, including Jontay Porter’s scheme to manipulate prop bets by providing co-conspirators non-public information about his plans to leave specific games early.¹ Even before that first game, US Integrity analysts could see the abnormally large wagers being placed on Porter, a player described as “marginal,” and red flags went up. When this scenario happened a second time, it was clear this was not a fluke – based on US Integrity’s report, the NBA opened an investigation and placed Porter on leave.² The investigation revealed, not only that he planned to manipulate his stats and provided that information to bettors, but also that he had placed bets on NBA games using someone else’s online account.³ In addition to receiving a lifetime ban from the NBA, Porter was also charged with conspiracy to commit wire fraud in federal court. He pled guilty in July of 2024 but has not yet been sentenced.

If you are only casually watching the news for sports betting stories, it may seem like there are more betting scandals than ever. And while it would be tempting to see this relationship as causal, it may also be the case that the spread of legal sports betting has necessitated the development of technology for monitoring who places bets on what and where that has simply improved detection. These tools have been instrumental in identifying integrity

¹ Devin Gordon, *US Integrity Catches Pro Athletes Involved in Betting Schemes*, BLOOMBERG LAW WHITE COLLAR & CRIM. L. NEWSL. (Aug. 20, 2024 at 5:00 AM EDT), <https://www.bloomberglaw.com/bloomberglawnews/white-collar-and-criminal-law/X7K931CO000000>.

² *Id.*

³ Hunter Patterson, *Timeline of Jontay Porter’s NBA Career and Gambling Investigations by League, Police*, N.Y. TIMES: THE ATHLETIC (Apr. 17, 2024), <https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/5423774/2024/04/17/jontay-porter-nba-gambling-ban-timeline/>.

issues. Geolocation, which is critical to ensure online bettors are located in jurisdictions where betting is legal, recently allowed the NFL to identify Colts players who were using an associate's account to place wagers while in the team's practice facility in violation of league rules.⁴ Another integrity product that Matt mentioned when we spoke is called Prohibet. This software maintains a list of prohibited bettors – those inside specific sports like athletes, coaches, officials, and employees – and blocks bets from their accounts on games they are not permitted to place wagers on. It also alerts leagues and sportsbooks to these attempts. But Prohibet can only include individuals who are identifiable as insiders, leaving holes in the safety net, particularly in college athletics. My colleague, Prof. Bob Boland, came to his current position after serving as the Athletics Integrity Officer at Penn State. In this role, he was responsible for developing policies and training to avoid sports betting scandals at the institution. We spoke at length about the risk of insider information in scholastic sports.

Bob Boland: I think I was really afraid when I went to Penn State and began to hear that there will be betting scandals -it's inevitable - that I was worried that I was going to have one. That was something I didn't want in my career. And I was worried that we were certainly a school that could easily be targeted.

We undertook a pretty careful program of trying to build some concentric circles of knowledge, information, training. I particularly focused on training our sports medicine staff, student managers, people who interacted more loosely with our athletic program than the people in the core of the athletic program. We sent letters to every family member this Thanksgiving right after sports betting became legal. And we heard back from a few of the families, like, I had no idea. But, you know, and we kind of did the scenario that your uncle John, who hasn't talked to you in a while, is suddenly asking you a lot about your football career and who's injured and who's not. Well, suddenly that's probably more real than you think.

Bob Boland: So, anyone who is within the athletic tent, so that's someone listed on a roster, someone listed in an athletic department staff, someone who is a coach, someone who is a president or someone in the line of presidential reporting, so a vice president for operations or somebody who would have oversight - they would all be immediately kind of definitionally ineligible to place a bet on a college athletic game, any under NCAA rules. And the way the NCAA rules was phrased, was any sport the NCAA offers a championship in. So we kind of brought that down to basically you could theoretically place legal bets on

⁴ Matt Rybaltowski, *Source: 'Pervasive' Wagering from Colts Player Includes Bets on His Own Team*, SPORTSHANDLE.COM (June 5, 2023), <https://sportshandle.com/colts-player-2023-betting-allegations/>.

horses, dogs, and high -lie, and maybe motorcross because the NSA didn't offer championships in any of those. But those people would be out.

Now, who were we worried about in the next circle? People with influence and people with knowledge. Trustees who are boosters who have the ability to attend practices, to be able to observe medical situations as they unfold in the college space. Doctors and other outside caregivers who would have an understanding of that. We had a very long debate over whether faculty should be able to bet on the institution. My position was that they shouldn't. In anything, and I was willing to give them a pool, but they would potentially have insider information. And I think that's actually it. Insider information in this context is anything that material would affect the performance of the team in the game or the player in the game.

And what we've seen that makes it more complex in this circumstance is because people can bet remotely, because people can bet on their own and that there are proposition bets that aren't winner-lose determinative or outcome determinative. There's a lot more betting product to make bets on where some piece of information that might be wrongfully obtained or inappropriately obtained could be. And I think that's an important piece. The other important piece in college, almost no college enterprise, like one conference has gone to it, has made player injury available. So you really don't know whether someone's hurt, unlike pro football where because they're heavily bet, they put an injury report out there so they can match or counterbalance the injury report, availability report to the betting action.

Sara Gras: As Bob and I discussed in Episode 3, college athletics has historically been the setting of some big sports scandals, and it's not really a surprise that the legalization of sports wagering has not changed this. But it has changed in the sense that technology and legalization make it much less difficult. As Matt pointed out, there's money to be made without even noticeably changing the outcome of a game and you don't need contacts in the mob to cash in. Even when players are caught, while they may face penalties, their conduct isn't always considered criminal. And if the stakes and risks both seem lower, it wouldn't be a surprise if cheating flourished – which is why integrity monitoring and athlete education is such a critical piece of the puzzle.

Sara Gras: So the vast conspiracies of the 50s, 60s, and 70s are no longer needed.

Bob Boland: They're not needed. You need a friend or two in another state who isn't really well connected to you and a way to pass that information. And again, that may be, that bet itself may be legal unless the person knows that it's the part of a conspiracy. So it's a really difficult thing to think about. I think it's less of an issue in pro sports, although the first year

of it, players placing bets on football or on the NFL, in some cases, not on their teams, but on other teams, is an indicator that this isn't well known by even those athletes and that they're willing to risk an \$800,000 a year job because of this. Now, I think in many cases, that was, a lack of education because they didn't know what the risk was and they didn't know that they'd get caught. But I think in college, was much more worried and continue to be much more worried where players aren't paid \$800,000 a year by and large and don't risk the same loss of career or games, which allows them to play smaller and more manipulative bets.

Sara Gras: So there are in some respects greater incentives for college athletes to bet because they just don't have the same means as their professional counterparts. And then they potentially have slightly less to lose. But in some of these scandals, some of these athletes have lost the chance to play professional sports. There have been criminal penalties in some. Kuhn in the Boston College scandal, right? He was sentenced to a substantial prison term for racketeering because of the involvement. Yeah. And so, I mean, there are some pretty significant penalties, but I think what I hear you saying is that for minor infractions, perhaps, or smaller infractions, there probably wouldn't be those same types of penalties.

Bob Boland: Yeah, think it was a 10 year term he got, right? They're much harder to discover. mean, they're discoverable if they're large enough. I mean, one of the things that I am still amazed at is in my first year of legal sports betting in the second or third game, a prominent player was thrown out for targeting in that game. And a bet came in during in game for \$39,000 in Mississippi against our team. So to cover, to literally the other team to win.

That was a bad bet as it turned out, but it was still one that you can see, you could track the change in action to almost the exact minute of that occurring. So I think you can begin to see, you can begin to make correlations that way and having a betting surveillance group. We used Matt Holt who I know you've interviewed for this process and US integrity at the time, we learned so much about the nature of betting and how it was watched. And I thought it was an invaluable level of education. And I think for anybody who's a lawyer, who's going to defend a potential claim of illegal betting on their campus, it would almost be the first question the regulator or the FBI would ask is who was doing your surveillance work? If you found out you weren't, I think you'd be open negligence in that circumstance.

Sara Gras: So in athletic compliance, you play a role in educating the athletics department, players, coaches, as you said, other professionals who work with the teams. What is the messaging? What is communicated?

Bob Boland: That's a great question. And because I think it's hard to define that message. I think historically it's always been it's forbidden, it's forbidden, it's forbidden, which as a parent, you know, only goes so far. In fact, usually encourages the person to that space. I think the education that really is necessary is to talk about the consequences and the potential betrayal, if you bet, of your teammates, of others, and how even your innocent giving of information could be used harmfully against your interests at another point. And that's kind of obtuse to sort of say what it is, but if I tell somebody about an injury or I tell somebody that we're not looking so good or we're not playing that well or we're worried about this game or this outcome, I've actually given betting fodder to potential gamblers in the most innocuous ways, but it may have hurt my team too in the process because I don't know that maybe there's somebody else on my team trying to fix the game or do something else.

So I do think it's critically important and like all compliance programs, the tone at the top really matters. And that's another place where I think it's critically important, but for presidents and chancellors, to say, not that this is bad, but to say it's real and to get some real data on it and find ways to reduce to some degree, the contagion of the betting process. The idea that everybody's being, everybody's being subjected to advertising on a daily basis. Players who, who, who got a betting account somewhere and think they're engaging in something innocuous, betting on their basketball team at one point suddenly are getting pressed to base place bets on their own football team. And that's sort of what happened at Iowa and Iowa state as the state examiners or gambling authorities gave this information over to the NCAA in this process. So kids who were sort of unaware were having this happen. And obviously, one of the other things that 18 to 24 year olds and largely men don't like to talk about is they don't like to really hear about help or talk about their weakness.

So the idea to have consistent messaging that you could be getting over your head very quickly, that this isn't necessarily controlled and is an activity that could really cause you harm, but harm your institution, harm to the school you love is probably an important message to get out. And again, I really, I had a pretty good athletic department in terms of getting them to pay attention to key issues, but this was one where I struggled to get traction because it was telling them about a problem that hadn't occurred yet. I also struggled to get them to pay even for some of that. And a lot of athletic departments were in the same place. They didn't really want to have this information. And if they had it, they didn't want to share it with the other people on campus with whom having it would matter, the police, for instance. So it was a very difficult process to lead this out into the open.

And I think it continues to be on campuses. I think the Bohannon case at Alabama is a particularly fascinating one. Alabama doesn't even have a lottery. They consider it immoral as a state. But once their baseball team could be bet in Ohio, sure enough, Bohannon and one of his friends went out and placed a really big bet that was quickly flagged and ultimately led to his firing. I would suspect in his case, he knew exactly what was going on. But I also would suspect that he probably hadn't been trained and hadn't been reinforced in his department that, hey, you're going to get caught and that's another really important message.

Sara Gras: Bob mentions a couple high profile betting scandals involving college athletics insiders here. The more high profile one involved Brad Bohannon, who was the baseball coach at the University of Alabama when he texted a bettor, Bert Neff, that the team's starting pitcher would be out of a game due to injury, information that was not available to the public. Neff then tried to place a \$100,000 bet on Alabama's opponent, LSU, to win the game – which they did. His wager was capped at \$15,000 and flagged as suspicious, which led to the discovery of Bohannon's involvement. While Neff was charged criminally, Bohannon only faced discipline from his employer and the NCAA. In addition to losing his position at Alabama, Bohannon also received a 15-year show cause order from the NCAA. During this 15-year period, any school that hired him would have to restrict him from an athletic position and he would be suspended for the first five baseball seasons, a punishment that effectively ended his career.⁵

The second happened in Iowa where multiple cases of betting in violation of both laws and league rules were uncovered as part of a state-wide investigation into sports betting at college athletic facilities. Five Iowa State football coaching staff were found to have placed thousands of bets in violation of NCAA rules, although not on their own team. They each received a one-year show cause order from the NCAA which will temporarily limit their employment prospects, but none were criminally charged.⁶ More than two dozen student athletes at Iowa and Iowa State were also found to have bet on sports in violation of NCAA rules. Of these, 14 were charged criminally for violations including using fake names when signing up for accounts and using third-party credit cards. All were deemed ineligible to play by the NCAA, a punishment that, for many, was actually harsher than it would be if it

⁵ Meghan Durham Wright, *Former Alabama Baseball Head Coach Violated Wagering, Ethical Conduct Rules*, NCAA.ORG (Feb. 1, 2024, 12:00 PM), <https://www.ncaa.org/news/2024/2/1/media-center-former-alabama-baseball-head-coach-violated-wagering-ethical-conduct-rules.aspx>.

⁶ Pavle Markovic, *Five Iowa State Football Staffers Disciplined by NCAA for Violating Sports Gambling Rules*, IOWA STATE DAILY (May 4, 2025), <https://iowastatedaily.com/318371/sports/five-iowa-state-football-staffers-disciplined-by-ncaa-for-violating-sports-gambling-rules>.

had happened just a year later after the league significantly eased its penalties for bets not on one's own team.⁷

While it's true that rules are rules, this change seems to indicate a recognition that such actions are not the same as those where inside information or influence on player performance is found. And it seems that the NCAA is starting to rethink its existing betting prohibitions more broadly as legal and social rules are evolving. In fact, the Division I council is scheduled to decide this month whether to allow student athletes and employees to bet on professional sports.⁸ Such a change would allow them to “refocus the Association's enforcement efforts on college sports betting and behaviors that directly impact game integrity.” And those efforts include continuing to oppose prop betting on college sports. NCAA president, Charlie Baker, whose congressional testimony I shared in the first episode of the season, has been a vocal supporter of legislation, both state and federal that limit the types of bets that can be made on college sports, in part because of the potential integrity threat. This includes the SAFE Bet Act, a federal law that would set comprehensive minimum standards for state sports betting, including prop betting on amateur and college athletes.⁹ It seems unlikely that either bill will make it to the floor, let alone be enacted, during the current session, but its introduction and the surrounding discussion does continue to bring attention to these issues.

As Charlie Baker highlighted in his testimony, prop bets also facilitate and exacerbate another threat to the integrity of athletics, one that is more challenging to eradicate than cheating – and that's the effect sports betting has had on how we treat athletes, both professional and scholastic.

Although Matt Holt was quick to extol the positive impact of sports betting on viewer engagement, he was also fully cognizant of the negative consequences that come along with that.

Matthew Holt: Fan was already short for fanatic. And when you add in financial loss to that, what we have seen in a society where people tend to anonymous anonymously hide behind user names is that there's a lot of pressure, threats, harassment, toward these athletes when they underperform or when people lose bets. So, hey, you got me in. I started

⁷ Scott Dochterman, *How a Gambling Sting Ensnared 2 Dozen Athletes and Raised Questions for the NCAA*, N.Y. TIMES: THE ATHLETIC (April 24, 2024), <https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/5436872/2024/04/24/noah-shannon-iowa-gambling-case-ncaa-questions/>

⁸ Meghan Durham Wright, *DI Council Introduces Proposal to Allow Betting on Pro Sports*, NCAA.ORG (June 24, 2025 at 7:48 PM), <https://www.ncaa.org/news/2025/6/24/media-center-di-council-introduces-proposal-to-allow-betting-on-pro-sports.aspx>.

⁹ SAFE Bet Act of 2025 S. 1033 and H.R. 2087, 119th Congress (2025), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/119th-congress/senate-bill/1033> and <https://www.congress.gov/bill/119th-congress/house-bill/2087>.

betting on this women's basketball team. Now I'm a fan because I bet on them and watch them every day. They're my favorite. But they lost me all my money today. And rather than just chalk it up to, hey, I lost a bet, I'm going to lash out on social media at the athletes and say, you're no good. You should kill yourself. I'm going to kill your, just all kinds of vile stuff that we never really dealt with in society before. So one of the sudden pressures on our athletes is they receive so much more harassment threats due to sports betting losses than they ever did before. We're trying to combat that side of it. We've actually got two states, Ohio and West Virginia to pass legislation that says if you get caught, threatening or harassing a student athlete, coach or official, they could take your way, your right to open a legal sports betting account or make a legal sports bet in that state. It has worked. The number of reported instances in those two states have gone down since they enacted that legislation. It's a first step, but we got to take a step before we could take five steps. So I think it's really important. But those are sort of the positives that sports has brought to America as well as some of some of the new negatives.

Sara Gras: As Matt noted, there are a couple states that have taken action to formally address this type of behavior but only a couple. Ohio inserted an amendment to the state's annual appropriations bill in 2023 that amended the state's involuntary exclusion statute to allow exclusion of "persons who threaten violence or harm against persons who are involved in sporting events, where the threat is related to sports gaming."¹⁰ West Virginia passed a bill in 2024 that amended their sports wagering statute to empower the gaming commission to create rules banning patrons for betting if they are found to have "engaged in a pattern of conduct of harassing a sports official, coach, or any participants."¹¹ In addition to these laws which simply ban offenders from gambling, a bill was introduced this year in New Jersey that would categorize athlete harassment motivated by gambling loss as a crime.¹² As of today, however, that bill has not moved out of committee.

While it's great to see some legislative action, more is clearly needed because abuse of athletes – in person and online – has increased dramatically in recent years. In 2020, a big-time sports bettor, Benjamin Patz, was charged with transmitting threats in interstate or foreign commerce for sending threatening direct messages to four Tampa Bay baseball players after the team lost a game to the White Sox. The messages included: "I will enter your home while you sleep...And sever your neck open...I will kill your entire family...Everyone you love will soon cease...I will cut up your family...Dismember the[m]

¹⁰ H.B. 33, 135th Gen. Assemb., (Ohio 2023), <https://www.legislature.ohio.gov/legislation/135/hb33>

¹¹ H.B. 4700, 2024 Reg. Sess., (W. Va. 2024),

https://www.wvlegislature.gov/Bill_Status/bills_text.cfm?billdoc=hb4700%20enr.htm&yr=2024&sesstype=RS&billtype=B&houseorig=H&i=4700.

¹² S.B. 4332, 2024 Reg. Sess. (N.J. 2025), <https://www.njleg.state.nj.us/bill-search/2024/S4332>

alive.”¹³ Patz pled guilty and received a relatively light sentence – six months of home arrest and mandatory treatment, as well as being banned from sports betting.¹⁴ There are less violent but equally annoying types of harassment as well, like bettors finding the Venmo accounts of athletes and sending them requests for money, ostensibly to cover their gambling losses.¹⁵ The Athletic, a subscription-based sports journalism department of the NYT, did an anonymous MLB athlete survey and more than 78% of respondents agreed that legalized sports betting has changed the way players are treated by fans. As one player said, “It used to be, if you win or lose the game, fans are happy or sad. Now it’s like, if you don’t cover, they’re sad. Or if you give up a run in the first inning, they’re sad. Or if you throw a fastball instead of a curveball, they’re sad.”¹⁶

Threats are particularly difficult for college athletes. They don’t have money or security to insulate them from angry bettors in the way that professional athletes do, as Prof. Boland observed. They are in their late-teens and early 20’s, walking on campus, going to class, hanging out with friends – quite literally at the beginning of their adult lives. And the fact that they are amateurs does not seem to make a difference to the individuals who target them.

Bob Boland: Because athletes, particularly, athletes are the first level of facing this, because athletes’ performances are public and are thought of as being important, there are emotions that surround it. On the flip side of that is when those emotions deal not just with a loss, but with the loss of money and prestige that go with that. I think then you, you, you see that the climate of social media interactions with athletes turning nastier and in some cases threatening. I’ve certainly seen that. and it, it, it strikes me as incredibly, incredibly difficult for me to cognize as a vaguely responsible adult that you would ever, that you would ever threaten the quarterback who threw an interception. You know, it would take a lot to get me there. But I also don’t bet my weekly paycheck on the game. I watch the game. So fortunately, that’s an addiction I don’t have.

¹³ Press Release, U.S. Attorney’s Office, Middle District of Florida, Sports Bettor Charged With Threatening Tampa Bay Rays Players And Other Professional Athletes (March 4, 2020), <https://www.justice.gov/usao-mdfl/pr/sports-bettor-charged-threatening-tampa-bay-rays-players-and-other-professional>.

¹⁴ David Purdum, *Sports Bettor Sentenced After Pleading Guilty to Threatening Tampa Bay Rays Players*, ESPN.COM (June 3, 2021, 12:33 PM ET), https://www.espn.com/sports-betting/story/_/id/31560031/sports-bettor-sentenced-pleading-guilty-threatening-tampa-bay-rays-players?

¹⁵ Doug Greenberg, *Venmo Requests and Death Threats: Heckling in the Digital Sports Betting Age*, ESPN.COM (Aug. 12, 2025, 7:07 AM ET), https://www.espn.com/espn/betting/story/_/id/45913349/espn-sports-betting-venmo-requests-death-threats-heckling-digital-age.

¹⁶ Tyler Kepner, *‘People Suck, Dude’: MLB Players on the Impact of Sports Betting on Fan Interactions*, N.Y. TIMES: THE ATHLETIC (June 11, 2025), <https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/6385628/2025/06/11/mlb-sports-betting-gambling-player-poll/>.

But we've definitely seen that turn up. I think it's exacerbated, particularly now in the era of NIL and the transfer portal where players can move and change is that there's less devotion to them as representatives of your school and more just a commodity you bet on. I think that we've, college athletes have long been existing in a professionalized space with the attributes of an attention of a professional and maybe not the money that goes with it. Now in some cases the money's included and they're in a much younger age. So there are issues that relate to.

I also think there are retaliation issues around campuses, around betting and losing too that are out there and that cause concern. So it is now an important factor and it's in the public eye. What does one do about it? I think a school needs to make sure if it comes from a fellow student that it's actionable, that there are, I don't wanna say speech codes, cause God, I hate that, but that there are at least consequences for threatening or harmful speech directed at fellow student or in the program. And I think we as adults need to set the tone in that space on how we look at that and how we choose to bet or whether we choose to bet in those circumstances and what kinds of bets we would be involved

Sara Gras: Are you aware of any schools or athletic programs that have taken action outside of their school communities to perhaps enjoin or limit activities of private citizens towards their student athletes?

Bob Boland: I'm not aware of an injunction having taken place, but I am aware of certain cases where police have been called and threatening social has been turned over to police forces. It's probably increasingly common now, unfortunately.

Sara Gras: In response to concerns about harassment, the NCAA engaged a third party to do a study to flag and investigate online abuse and threats against NCAA athletes, coaches and officials during specific championships throughout 2023 and 2024.¹⁷ What the data showed was pretty shocking. There were 1.3 million public social media messages mentioning just over 3000 monitored accounts, with more than 72,000 flagged as potentially abusive by AI. More than 5000 were reported to the platforms after verification as being in violation of community standards prohibiting abuse. Nearly 80% of these messages were directed at college basketball players, both men and women, during March Madness.¹⁸ I'm not going to repeat any of the violent, racist, sexist, and homophobic language these messages contained, but examples are included in the NCAA report. And I can assure you, they are awful – and I can only imagine the impact it has on a young

¹⁷ NCAA, ONLINE ABUSE IN NCAA CHAMPIONSHIPS: NCAA PILOT STUDY 2023-24 4 (2024), <https://ncaaorg.s3.amazonaws.com/ncaa/wagering/NCAAThreatMatrixPilotStudyPublicReport.pdf>.

¹⁸ *Id.* at 8.

person's psyche when they are receiving dozens or even hundreds of them a day, compounded by the stress of competition in the public eye.

The NCAA continues to lobby states to include mandatory harassment reporting and penalties into their gaming legislation.¹⁹ They also launched the "Draw the Line" campaign against harassment featuring an ad that aired throughout March Madness called, "Don't Be a Loser."²⁰ And these are very positive steps – but so much has already shifted and changed that it's hard to know whether this will even make a dent in the problem. I had the opportunity to speak with Katy Larkin, Senior Director for the Office of Student Conduct at Penn State. In this role, she often needs to address situations where students have violated laws or university rules or are otherwise deemed to be at-risk. As someone who was a university administrator both before and after sports betting became legal, she has seen how legalization has changed the culture of sports on campus.

Katy Larkin: I think there's been a large shift in collegiate athletics over the last 10 or so years. Obviously, there's many areas where it's changing. But I think the experience of engagement is complicated. If you are engaging because you have school pride or you love that sport, you're not as angry when your team loses as you are when you've lost a lot of money. And so I think it has sort of shifted the student experience from, I'm a Penn Stater and I'm going and I'm participating in this moment. He's very emotional. Anyone who's been to a Penn State game knows it's sort of unlike anything else. It's loud. You're there in the moment. There's traditions. You're chanting, jumping. And if you're so worried about are they going to have a certain over -under, are they going to make this play, who's going to be on the field for so many minutes, then you're extracted from living in that moment. You're not participating as a collective with everyone else who's participating. And it's really become more of a, it's just a singular experience for you, yourself.

Sara Gras: While many college students are not even old enough to gamble, many still do – openly and socially – emboldened by the seeming ubiquity of sports betting.

Katy Larkin: Yeah, I think it's just really normalized. It's just like when I was a student, I didn't know anyone who was betting on games. And if you did, that was like very taboo. And you just sort of didn't talk about it in front of other people because it was illegal. And, you know, where were these people that you were finding to place these bets? And so that was just not part of my college experience. But now students are doing it all the time. And

¹⁹ Massillon Myers, *NCAA to Begin Advocating for Updated Sports Betting Laws in State Legislatures*, NCAA.ORG (Oct. 4, 2023, 12:00 PM), <https://www.ncaa.org/news/2023/10/4/media-center-ncaa-to-begin-advocating-for-updated-sports-betting-laws-in-state-legislatures.aspx>.

²⁰ Saquandra Heath, *'Don't Be a Loser': NCAA Launches Sports Betting Anti-Harassment Video*, NCAA.ORG (March 18, 2025, 1:00 PM), <https://www.ncaa.org/news/2025/3/18/media-center-don-t-be-a-loser-ncaa-launches-sports-betting-anti-harassment-video.aspx>.

it's so public. So it's on Instagram and I won't name any specific groups on Instagram, but it's like just this expectation of how your collegiate experience is, especially somewhere like at Penn State where sports is such a big part of the community and of being a Penn Stater, that it's kind of like if you didn't ever do it, that would be weird. And then also that sports betting has become so niche. So you can bet on something as specific as like how often does water boy run out onto the field. So it's almost like this really fun, easy game that doesn't feel serious anymore. I think that's probably the biggest difference for me is that when you want to talk to a student about maybe this is problem behavior or maybe we're concerned about this, they're like, why? This is just a part of our daily life.

Sara Gras: As Katy says, the normalization of the marriage between sports and betting makes it difficult to address its negative implications with the general student population, no matter how seriously the athletics department takes their role in educating athletes and employees from their side. And addressing this issue with students is not a small task – Katy confirmed the importance of age-appropriate messaging.

Katy Larkin: And so it's really important because college students are still finishing up their brain development and they're also experiencing the world in a way that's different than sort of the general public. And I shouldn't say all college students, but the majority of our traditionally aged college students are between the ages of 18 and 24. We know that when they experience a dopamine hit, that's gonna feel a little bit different than when I experienced a dopamine hit and they're gonna be chasing it a little bit of a different way. And so we need to make sure that our interventions are focused to their developmental needs, but then also what they're experiencing in the world. So if they get on Instagram and they're, know, it's not even an ad, it's just like intertwined to everything that they're seeing regarding college football, for example, about betting, you know, as they scroll through, maybe an ad does pop up and it just feels so normal.

Sara Gras: In an effort to minimize integrity risks and reduce pressure on college athletes from their peers, many states already ban betting on that state's college teams, including New Jersey, New York, Delaware, Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts. Collegiate prop betting is already prohibited or limited in a handful of states - Arizona, Colorado, Florida, Tennessee, and Virginia, and more may soon be coming with bills in Georgia²¹ and Oklahoma²² still pending. And this all seems to make sense to me, even though we can't lay the blame for mistreatment of athletes or integrity lapses entirely on prop betting. But I have to wonder – when will it be enough? I don't want to be a downer but trying to address

²¹ Georgia Sports Betting Act, H.B. 686, Reg. Sess. (Ga. 2025), <https://www.legis.ga.gov/legislation/71019>.

²² H.B. 1537, 60th Leg., Reg. Session (Okla. 2025),

<https://www.oklegislature.gov/BillInfo.aspx?Bill=hb1537&Session=2500>.

all the issues popping up around sports betting, figuring out which problem is the most immediate, what can be solved with a quick change to the laws or regulations - it's a little like playing whack-a-mole. Something else is always going to pop up. The next and final episode of this season will be a look at what's coming in the world of sports betting. Where is this business headed? What will be the next legal challenge? And even if we decide – oops we made a mistake, sports betting isn't so great after all – can we ever put this genie back in the bottle?

Hearsay from the Sidelines is a collaboration of Seton Hall Law School and Culture in Sports; research and writing by Sara Gras with the help of my amazing research assistants, Emily Raedisch and Lauren Vuolo; music by my son, Robert; produced by Sara Gras and Dr. Jeremy Piasecki, Executive Director of Culture in Sports. Links to all available academic and primary legal sources, media, music, transcription, and other materials mentioned in this episode are available on the Hearsay from the Sidelines show page, hearsayfromthesidelines.com. And if you like this show, check out cultureinsports.com where you'll find more articles, shows, webinars, summits, and courses for sports leaders of all levels.