

Gambling addiction among footballers: analysis

There have been a number of high-profile cases involving professional footballers that have lost large amounts of income through gambling. Professor Mark Griffiths of the International Gaming Research Unit at Nottingham Trent University examines what rules apply to footballers that wish to gamble and analyses if footballers are predisposed to gambling addiction.

Three years ago, the media lapped up the story that Wayne Rooney allegedly ran up gambling debts of £700,000 with the Goldchip betting company¹. Combined with this, the Government's (then) Sports Minister, Richard Caborn, warned the England team footballers not to bet on World Cup matches, endorsing the decision by FIFA to outlaw players betting on the tournament². These high profile events demonstrate that footballers' gambling is not new and that rules must be in place to protect the professional integrity of 'the beautiful game'. This article briefly examines what rules are in place in relation to footballers that want to gamble. This is followed by a more in-depth look at the issue of gambling addiction amongst footballers and whether it is an issue that clubs must take seriously.

Football Association rules and regulations

The English Football Association (FA) has strict rules on players' gambling and betting activity. More specifically, the FA rules³ state that in relation to betting and gambling:

'7. A Participant shall not, either directly or indirectly bet, or instruct, permit or enable any person for the Participant's benefit to bet, on the result, progress or conduct of a Match or Competition.

8. A Participant shall not provide to any other person any information relating to football which the Participant has by virtue of his or her position within the game and which is not publicly available with the intention that it be used by the other person for or in relation to betting.

9. A Participant shall not breach Rule E7 or 8 above where the Participant can prove that: the bet was on authorised and registered football pools; or the bet was on a

Match or Competition in which the Participant was not participating or had no influence, either direct or indirect.'

However, other types of gambling (like gambling on horse racing or other sporting and non-sporting activities) are permitted. Those who break the FA's rules face fines or a playing ban. Most recently, in April 2009, five football players were charged with breaches of The FA's rules on betting in football⁴. The majority of the charges related to bets placed on the May 3 (2008) match between Accrington Stanley and Bury. Betting agencies in North West England began to get suspicious when they detected a significantly increased amount of betting activity in the run-up to the match. Furthermore, the amounts being bet were significantly larger than normal. Of the five footballers charged, four of them played for Accrington Stanley (Jay Harris, David Mannix, Robert Williams and Peter Cavanagh) and the other one played for Bury (Andrew Mangan). All five were alleged to have bet on Bury to win the game. The players were eventually fined and suspended from playing football. For instance, Peter Cavanagh received an eight-month suspension from playing football along with a £3,500 fine⁵. Despite all these sanctions, some bookmakers are highly likely to go looking for business among those groups of individuals with very high disposable incomes. Professional footballers may even top bookmakers' client wish lists. Selectabet.net even has a dedicated webpage called 'How to gamble like a Premiership footballer'⁶.

Why do professional footballers gamble?

Gambling and football have always been inextricably linked. Whether it is the football pools, a punt on who will win the FA Cup final, or a

spread bet on the number of yellow cards to be handed out during the next World Cup, gamblers love betting on the outcome of football matches. But there are also good psychological reasons that encourage top players to gamble - particularly if looked at from the player's perspective.

It is the night before a big match. Premiership players are confined to staying in a hotel. No sex. No alcohol. No junk food. To pass time, footballers may watch television, play cards, or play a video game, believing these are 'healthier' for them. The difficulty in detecting gambling addictions is likely to be one factor in its growth over other forms of addiction - especially as many players are more health-conscious and the testing for alcohol and drugs is now more rigorous. However, any of these 'healthier' activities - when taken to excess - can cause problems. England goalkeeper David James once claimed his loss of form was because of his round-the-clock video game playing⁷. In short, the top players are very well paid and inevitably have lots of time on their hands. By their own admission, ex-Arsenal and England players like Paul Merson and Tony Adams lost millions of pounds gambling and regularly attended Gamblers Anonymous along with treatment for other addictions to alcohol and cocaine⁸. Paul Merson claims to have lost £7 million to gambling and cocaine, and was still having severe gambling problems over a decade after his football career had ended⁹.

It would also seem to be the case that there is a psychosocial subculture of gambling by footballers. The Birmingham City striker Kevin Phillips claimed that when he was part of Kevin Keegan's England squad (as a Sunderland player in the 1990s), he was alienated by the other players

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for not taking part in the team's pre-match gambling activities¹⁰. Phillips' ex-strike partner at Sunderland, Niall Quinn, knows only too well the inherent dangers of gambling. While playing for Arsenal, he regularly lost his whole week's wages at the bookmakers inside an hour of getting it. Whilst he was never truly out of control, he did have to re-mortgage his flat to pay off gambling debts¹¹. Quinn says he was lucky not to be paid the kind of wages players get today, as he would have lost more. Ex-footballer (and now TV and radio football pundit) Steve Claridge claimed in his autobiography to have blown £1 million on gambling¹², while the Blackburn winger Keith Gillespie became addicted after placing bets for team-mates¹³.

More recently, there have been a number of high profile cases of top footballers with gambling problems. These include the West Ham winger Matthew Etherington¹⁴ and Tottenham striker David Bentley, who was reported to be placing up to 100 bets a day on everything from horses and greyhounds to online poker and bingo¹⁵. The most recent case to hit the headlines was Icelandic ex-Chelsea player Eidur Gudjohnsen, who was alleged to be £6 million in debt because of his gambling¹⁶ despite £3 million-a-year wages at his current club, Monaco. While he was at Manchester United, the Dutch striker Ruud Van Nistelrooy said that "obscene" wages were fuelling constant gambling by other players in the team¹⁷.

I am often asked by the press to comment on why footballers gamble and whether they are more susceptible to gambling addiction. One player I was asked to comment on was Manchester United striker Michael Owen (whose friend Stephen Smith -

somewhat ironically - operated the company that Wayne Rooney ran up his debts with). It was clear that to me that Owen did not have a gambling problem and could easily afford to lose the amounts he was alleged to have lost. However, it could be argued that he and players like Wayne Rooney are role models for many teenagers. As a psychologist, I have some concerns about the messages that high profile footballers send out about gambling to vulnerable individuals. Teenagers are less likely than adults to be able to make informed choices, because they are young and impressionable. Footballers who gamble are unconsciously giving out the message to adolescents that gambling is something that goes hand-in-hand with being a top footballer.

What can be done?

Tony Adams alleged that every football club in England has a problem with gambling addiction. This was one of the primary reasons why set up his own charity (Sporting Chance) to help footballers with addiction problems¹⁸. At present, this appears to be the main source of help for footballers who are problem gamblers, although Gamblers Anonymous also appears to be another popular outlet for help. Press reports indicate that up to 60 Premiership football players are being treated for gambling addiction¹⁹. Adams alleged that some players - despite being on vast wages - even stole from their children's savings to cover their losses²⁰. He said footballers that were gambling addicts "lose their self-respect and before you know where they are, they are nicking money out of their kids' savings to have a bet. It is something about which clubs need to be aware. It is difficult to trace - but it can cause a lot of damage."

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Peter Kay, the Chief Executive of the Sporting Chance clinic, claims that footballer's passion for football predisposes them to gambling problems. He said: "If you have the kind of driven, obsessive character that it takes to become a professional footballer, with that tunnel-vision, then you are predisposed. I have not come across a football club where gambling does not play a part in the players' lives. If a player is dropped from the team, this can often lead to depression and a craving for the buzz of football - sometimes found in gambling. It is acceptable to gamble. There have always been famous gamblers in football and for most it is enjoyable. But for around 10 per cent it is an addiction"²¹.

Concluding comments

Although the FA has strict rules on gambling by footballers, these are not a deterrent to gamble and as outlined above, there are many reasons why footballers may gamble to excess compared to other less 'healthy' behaviours, like excessive drinking or drug taking. It is a shame that addictions to drugs and alcohol tend to generate more sympathy among the general public, as many people view gambling as a self-inflicted vice. But gambling to excess can be just as destructive because of the huge financial consequences. Therefore, time rich and money rich young footballers need to be educated about the potential downsides of excessive and/or high stakes gambling. Through the work of the Sporting Chance clinic, this is beginning to happen, but as

footballers' wages continue to increase, gambling is one activity that may place an increasing role in the lives of the players.

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