

Gambling in Football: How much is too much?

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Abstract

Rationale: Football and gambling have a long, intertwined history. This commentary seeks to explore the changing nature and implications of this relationship, how the relationship has been affected by COVID-19, and how the relationship may change in the future

Approach: No new data were collected for this commentary.

Findings: The commentary identifies some recent examples, and some examples from the more distant annals of football history, of the often-controversial history between football and gambling before discussing the increased prevalence of gambling industry shirt sponsors. Research highlighting the saturation of gambling in football is then discussed, and the implications of this. Different Government and Football Association responses to gambling in football, and the potential impact of COVID-19 related legislation are examined, before recommendations from the recent Lord Gambling Industry Committee are considered.

Practical Implications: Discussion of research in gambling and football highlights some of the ethical considerations facing clubs and legislators.

Research Contribution: This commentary brings together some of the issues surrounding the close relationship between gambling and football.

Keywords:

Gambling; football; sponsorship;

Introduction

The relationship between gambling and football has a long history and it is a relationship that in recent years, appears to have been growing ever stronger. However, it is not a relationship that has grown without controversy; any sport on which bets can be placed is open to corruption, and football is no different (Forrest, 2012; Hill, 2010; Numerato, 2016). Gambling has been at the heart of some of football's major scandals in the UK and beyond from as far back as 1915 when, against a backdrop of the 1st World War, players from Manchester United and Liverpool conspired to engineer a 2-0 win for United, a score on which players from both sides had placed bets (Airey & Burnell, 2015). More recently, gambling, football, and footballers have never been far from the headlines, whether that be Nicklas Bendtner celebrating scoring for Denmark by exposing bookmaker branded underpants ("Euro 2012: Nicklas Bendtner banned," 2012), or ex-Sutton United goalkeeping coach Wayne Shaw eating a pie on the substitutes bench ("Wayne Shaw: Pie-eating keeper," 2017). Moving beyond these seemingly innocuous and superficially comical offences, previous research has identified a strong gambling culture within professional football that can have serious negative effects on the individual (Lim et al, 2017); recent history offers a litany of examples of high profile footballers who have experienced significant problems with gambling, including among others, Paul Merson, Wayne Rooney, Michael Chopra, Keith Gillespie, John Hartson, and Michael Owen.

The Football Association's (FA) relationship with gambling has often conveyed mixed messages; Joey Barton was given a playing-career ending ban for his gambling activity, but whilst suffering from gambling addiction, was playing for consecutive clubs with gambling sponsors (Rangers and Burnley) (MacInnes, 2017). Whilst it can be argued that the ban was appropriate given the volume of bets placed in direct contravention of the FA's own rules, the bets were placed from a verified account in his own name. There was no penalty for the company that took Barton's money, despite undoubtedly knowing he was breaking rules. In 2019, Everton's Yerry Mina was fined £10,000 and warned about his future conduct for breaking FA rules relating to betting, for appearing in TV advert in his native Colombia, as footballers are not allowed to appear in gambling adverts (Haigh, 2019). However, at the time, Mina was proudly turning out for Everton every week, with gambling firm Sportpesa emblazoned across his chest. Players can advertise gambling when representing their clubs, but not as individuals. Furthermore, although the FA is happy for clubs to continue to sign lucrative sponsorship deals with gambling companies, they don't see gambling as a suitable industry for them as an organisation to be commercially associated with. In 2017, the FA ended their partnership with Ladbrokes, citing the belief that it was inappropriate for an organisation responsible for regulating sports betting rules in football, to have a sports betting partner ("Football Association board agrees", 2017).

Football and Gambling – Sponsorship

The relationship between gambling and football was evident almost 100 years ago in the 1920's when the Littlewoods company launched the first football pools (Barker, 2020). Littlewoods maintained a strong association with football, becoming the first official sponsor of the FA Cup in 94/95 ("F.A. Cup gets sponsor", (1994), and later sponsoring the both the League Cup and the Charity Shield. However, it was not until tighter regulation regarding alcohol and tobacco sponsorship of sports teams and events, that gambling sponsorship between noticeably more prominent (Turco, 1999).

In the 2002/03 Premier League season, Fulham became the first Premier league club to be sponsored by a gambling company, Betfair. In the 06/07 season, for the first time, the number of Premier League clubs sponsored by gambling companies overtook the number sponsored by alcohol

companies. Fast forward to the 17/18 season and the end of Everton's partnership with Beer Chang, replaced by a deal with SportPesa, ensured the absence of alcohol sponsorship of any topflight team. In the most recent 2019/20 season, ten Premier league clubs have a gambling company logo on their shirts; furthermore, 16 Championship clubs were sponsored by gambling companies. Across both divisions, there were significantly more gambling shirt sponsors than from any other industry.

** Insert Figure 1 about here **

Alongside shirt sponsors, for the 2019/20 season, only three clubs did not have an official betting partner (Brighton, Sheffield United and Brighton), whilst Leicester and Newcastle both have three official betting partners (Bradley, 2019). It is interesting to note however, that none of the Premier League's six biggest clubs, who also happen to have the six biggest shirt sponsorship deals, are sponsored by gambling companies (Gough, 2019). It will be interesting to observe if the proliferation of gambling sponsorship will break in to the traditional 'big 6', or whether the relationship will continue to focus on those outside the very elite.

The Gamblification of Football

The relationship between gambling and football seems to have been growing ever more prominent, and some studies have sought to conceptualise both the costs and benefits of gambling at personal, interpersonal, and societal levels (Latvala, Lintonen, & Konu, 2019). The perceptions of gambling and football from the fans themselves, appears to be somewhat mixed. In a survey of supporters of EFL clubs, 71% responded that gambling companies were acceptable sponsors ("2019 Supporters Survey", 2019), however a different survey with a smaller sample reported that only 13% of respondents would be happy with their own team being sponsored by a gambling company, and just 10% believe that their clubs are doing enough to mitigate potential harms associated with gambling ("Clubs must do more on gambling risk", 2019). These disparate results highlight the importance of understanding both the commissioning and the funding of specific surveys, and how questions are framed and asked.

There is an argument that peak saturation of gambling within football has been reached, and the tide is starting to turn. Whilst it is acknowledged that there are myriad factors that can influence the normalisation of gambling within society and the development and trajectory of gambling disorder (Reith & Dobbie, 2011), in addition to the noticeable increase in top-two tier gambling shirt sponsorship, previous research has identified just how entrenched gambling has become within football and football culture (McGee, 2020), prompting public health concerns (Bunn et al, 2019).

When analysing the prevalence of gambling marketing visible on-screen during three episodes of Match of the Day (e.g. pitch-side hoardings, shirt sponsors), researchers identified 764 instances of gambling advertising, with an average exposure time of 7.5 seconds. For comparison, there were 176 instances of alcohol marketing across the three episodes (Cassidy & Ovenden, 2017). The same study also analysed gambling advertising in three live matches on sky, and observed 524 instances of gambling advertising, with an average exposure of 11.1 seconds (*ibid*). More recently, researchers investigated the instances of gambling marketing in matchday programmes, across two rounds of matches in the Premier League and Championship (where each team was the home team and the away team once each). The paper reported that for both adverts and incidental marketing, the prevalence was significantly higher for gambling, than for either alcohol marketing, or responsible gambling messages. On average, each programme contained 37.8 instances of gambling marketing, and that gambling marketing was found, on average, on 22.2% of pages. In matches where the home

team was sponsored by a gambling company, the average percentage of pages with gambling marketing rose to 30.8%. Perhaps most concerningly, gambling marketing was found in almost 60% of child-specific sections of matchday programmes (Sharman, Ferreira, & Newall, 2019).

Exposure to gambling brands through continued advertising and sponsorship leads to a normalisation of gambling culture (Djohari et al., 2019; Pitt et al., 2019), sometimes described as the 'gamblification' of football (McGee, 2020). Consistent exposure to brands leads to increased recognition; international research has shown that through sponsorship of sports team and wider association with sports, this recognition is also apparent in children, normalising the presence of gambling in sport (Thomas et al., 2016). In the UK, a recent study investigating gambling brand recognition in football fans found that 46% of young people and 71% of adults could name at least one gambling brand. Areas where participants recalled seeing gambling advertising included on television, on technology /screens, in stadiums and in betting venues. Brand recall was significantly higher in young people who watched a lot of football on television (Djohari et al, 2019); brand recognition in children for a product only legally accessible by adults highlights one of the potential areas of harm as a result of the relationship between gambling and football. Furthermore, it has been suggested that the exposure given to gambling companies via football can increase the amount of gambling in society. This logically facilitates an increase in disordered gambling and as a consequence, the addictive consumption of gambling (Jones, Pinder, & Robinson, 2020). An environment is created where gambling needs football, and football needs gambling; however, as a disproportionate amount of income comes from those experiencing gambling harm (Fiedler, Kairouz, Costes, & Weißmüller, 2019), the morality of this ever-expanding reliance must be thoroughly interrogated.

What does the future hold?

The disruption brought to football by the global COVID-19 pandemic has brought the relationship between gambling and football into sharp focus, as many clubs will be facing a financial vacuum that will somehow need to be filled. Pre COVID-19, there had been moves from different national governing bodies within UEFA to create some distance between football and gambling for some time. In Italy, a decree was passed in 2018 that banned gambling advertising, and specifically pertinent for football, banned the sponsorship of football teams by gambling companies (Gibbs, 2018). The decree originally declared that all gambling sponsorship deals must be terminated by the 1st January 2019, although this deadline was subsequently extended to July 2019 to allow expiration of existing deals. However, since the COVID-19 pandemic has hit clubs hard financially, Serie A chiefs have been lobbying for a temporary 12-month suspension of the decree to allow clubs to strike deals with gambling companies (Daniels, 2020). This move exemplifies how clubs view the gambling industry as a cash-rich industry that can provide a much needed financial injection, however it seems there is little attention paid to the potential public health consequences of allowing the promotion of gambling as a viable way to secure short-term financial stability.

In Spain, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and related fears of an upsurge in gambling, at the end of March the Spanish Government introduced urgent measures as part of a 'social shield' decree that severely restricting the ability of gambling companies to advertise (Tilley, 2020). Although some of the restrictions were relaxed as lockdown was eased in June, La Liga resumed on the 12th June with a ban still in place on all in-stadium gambling marketing. Unlike the period permitted in Italy, there was no grace period to honour existing deals for La Liga clubs, meaning that eight clubs were forced to resume the season with blanked out gambling shirt sponsors (Menmuir, 2020). The restrictions have been met with some criticism, often focusing on the precarious post-COVID financial status of some clubs ("Spain's proposed advertising restrictions", 2020), however this line

of argument on serves to highlight how financially reliant clubs can become on gambling money. The strong measures represent a clear statement of intent from the Spanish government to distance gambling from football, with some of the temporary measures potentially being made more permanent.

Whilst changes in Spain and Italy have come from governmental decree, in the UK, the most notable changes to gambling advertising regulation have come from industry-led self-regulation initiatives. Members of the Betting and Gaming Council¹ (BGC) agreed to a ten-point pledge during lockdown to encourage 'safer' gambling ("Ten pledges for safer gambling", 2020), which was augmented by a voluntary reduction in gambling advertising on TV and radio ("BGC members to remove", 2020). However, past research from the alcohol field shows that industry self-regulation is more likely to 'delay statutory regulation rather than promote public health' (Noel, Lazzarini, Robaina, & Vendrame, 2017, p.57), and that self-regulated marketing codes are often violated, and fail to protect vulnerable populations (Noel, Babor, & Robaina, 2017).

There is also evidence from within football, that clubs are starting to understand the wider public health implications of close relationships with the gambling industry and have made moves to distance themselves. In February 2020, Everton announced the termination of their sponsorship deal with SportPesa ("Everton to end", 2020), whilst more recently, Aston Villa allowed a partnership with W88 to end ("Aston Villa ends", 2020). Both clubs replaced a gambling brand with online car sales site Cazoo, however it should be noted W88 were recently revealed as the new shirt sponsor for Crystal Palace (Cawley, 2020). Further down the pyramid, both Luton Town and Tranmere Rovers have refused to partner gambling companies on ethical grounds ("Luton Town 'not comfortable'", 2018; Cavilla, 2020), whilst Lewes FC have developed an ethical framework for sponsorship that precludes the gambling industry, instead opting to support the charity Gambling With Lives ("Lewes F.C. endorses", 2019).

The recent Lords Gambling Industry Committee report showed evidence of cross-party governmental support for tighter regulation for the gambling industry and paid specific attention to the relationship between gambling and football (Select Committee, 2020). Recommendations from the report include banning gambling companies from sponsoring football teams, and the removal of all gambling advertising from inside and around stadiums, including in the matchday programme. The recommendations allow a grace period for clubs below the premier league and other sports; changes are recommended for the premier league with immediate effect.

The recommended changes would serve to significantly reduce exposure to gambling marketing through mediums such as pitch side advertising boards, gambling adverts (often for new sign-up offers with bonuses) in the matchday programme, and perhaps most significantly, through removal of shirt sponsors from the front of shirts. The subsequent reduction in gambling marketing exposure to all fans, including children would be significant; removal of this exposure would not just reduce gambling exposure for those within the stadium, but also for a wider audience. TV audiences would not see the advertising boards either in live games or in highlights programmes; gambling logos would not be prominent on post-match interview backgrounds, nor would they be visible in any online or print match reports that include a picture of a given club's games, all subtle forms of exposure that currently fall outside the classification of advertising, and therefore are not subject to any Advertising Standards Agency (ASA) legislation. When considering the other, more subtle ways in which gambling is marketed to a football watching audience, the current BGC voluntary 'whistle to

¹ The Betting and Gaming Council is a gambling industry trade body, representing over 90% of the UK betting and gaming industry (excluding lotteries).

whistle' ban, where BGC members agreed not to run TV adverts during live games pre-9pm between five minutes before kick-off and five minutes after the final whistle does little to reduce the near constant exposure to gambling branding during live football. However, should the whistle to whistle ban remain, and be adhered to in conjunction with the Lords recommendations, the amount of gambling marketing directed at fans will be significantly reduced.

However, if the recommendations surrounding shirt sponsorship and advertising are implemented, the impact on football finances could potentially be enormous, and in the Premier League, immediate. Loss of sponsorship and advertising income would not impact all clubs equally; for example, the sponsorship deal Derby County struck with 32Red was inextricably linked with the signing of Wayne Rooney. Loss of this income would leave a financial black hole, unless a replacement sponsor willing to at least get close to the value of the 32Red deal could be found, making financial fair play adherence even more challenging. Clubs *not* sponsored by gambling companies would not have this problem. Furthermore, the entire football league is sponsored by a gambling company; implementation of the Lord's recommendations would require re-branding of entire competitions, and a loss of income for governing bodies. However, the recent moves by Everton and Aston Villa have shown gambling companies can be replaced. The government is due to provide a response to the report before the end of September 2020, before debating in the House of Lords how and when any recommendations from the report are actioned.

Conclusions

Gambling has long been a part of football and will undoubtedly retain a presence within the sport in the future, however the nature of this relationship depends largely on clubs' evolving evaluations of the merits of relationship with gambling companies, and whether the recommendations from the Lords report are translated into action. Considering the source and strength of the recommendations, it is clear there is a growing appetite at legislative level to loosen the grip of the gambling industry on football in the UK. The relationship may look very different as football moves into the future.

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