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Boston College: Fixing and Gambling in Sport

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
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When word spread early this week that football players at Boston College were suspected of fixing games, a number of people feigned shock. Whatever turns out to be the ultimate finding of investigators at Boston College, no one should be shocked by this news.

It is likely that without gambling modern sport as we know it would not exist. From the pre-modern era gambling was tied to sport, and since then they have been inseparable.

From colonial times in America gambling was central to horse-racing as well as the popular sports of cock-fighting and boxing. Wherever sportsmen gathered dollars were wagered with abandon. Indeed gambling in the old South was integral to the meanings of class and caste in the plantation culture.

In the 19th century the emergence of modern sport multiplied the gambling opportunities. Again horse-racing led the way, but the sports of sailing, pedestrianism, foot races, boxing, dog fights, cock fights, ratting, baseball, and any other sport one could imagine were laced with wagering. Indeed gambling was central to the interest that so many people seemed to have in the games other people played.

In the history and nostalgia of baseball there are idyllic scenes of people gathered in public squares waiting for the news of the out-of-town game to come in by telegraph, and then for that news to be posted on the chalk boards for all to see. What was the object of all the attention? Certainly the outcome of the game carried some significance, but the outcome of the wagering was much more important to those gathered in what looked like a quaint communal exercise.

The rise of intercollegiate athletics led to an expansion of sport as public event and spectacle. As the games corrupted the educational standards of universities, the gamblers corrupted the games. With the emergence of professional baseball, gamblers swarmed into the ballparks where betting opportunities were available on every pitch. Gamblers threatened, harassed, and tried to bribe underpaid players to do their bidding, and occasionally they succeeded. The 1919 fix of the World Series was but the tip of the iceberg.

In the 20th century gambling has become a major sports related business, or perhaps it is more accurate to say that sport is a major gambling related business. The rise of mass sport has brought with it gambling opportunities never before dreamed of by the most optimistic of bookmakers.

The rise of college basketball and later the pros multiplied the opportunities for betting. The showcase of college basketball in the 30's and 40's, Madison Square Garden, with its double- and triple-headers, became the centerpiece of a burgeoning New York gambling industry.

Not surprisingly the biggest college sports scandals have been in basketball with major revelations in 1951 and 1961 and minor revelations at several institutions since, including one at Boston College in 1981 when Rick Kuhn was convicted of fixing six games during the 1978-79 season.

Students at Boston College report that their campus has as many as four regular bookmakers serving the student body, and the athletes are among their clients. HBO will report next week that on one Southeastern Conference campus there is a weekly handle of \$14,000, and that some students working their way through college as bookmakers are pulling down \$36,000 a year.

Modern sports gambling owes much of its success to Charles K. McNeil, a Connecticut math teacher who left that calling in the 40's for a more noble profession in Chicago. He became a bookmaker. There he realized that the biggest problem facing his new vocation was enticing people to bet on all sporting events, even the mismatches. The important thing to bookmakers is to spread the betting evenly on either side of a contest. The bookmaker takes his ten percent and the payoffs come from the handle. McNeil's genius was to invent a device to make every game a close one to ensure a betting balance. He is the father of the point spread, a magnificent and ingenious device, that one of his colleagues called, the greatest invention since the zipper.

Unfortunately the point spread also opened up a new range of opportunities for fixing events, in which the athlete was not required to throw a game, but only asked to adjust the score to the spread. Basketball proved most susceptible to this manipulation, but football and baseball are not much more difficult to giggle.

Big time college sports is a big business for the colleges and for the gamblers. In an atmosphere of corruption, in a climate in which players feel they deserve a bigger share of the profits, and in a campus environment where gambling is a part of the student culture, no one should be surprised by this week's revelations. And there will always be more to come.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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