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Rick Burton
Syracuse University

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Weighing the odds: Winning is a rush, losers can be scarred for life

RICK BURTON

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When the editors of this publication asked me to contribute a piece on gambling, I was struck by the fact that I really didn't have a fixed position on the topic.

Maybe the grueling process of writing would uncover the ugly truth.

You want my pro and con list?

On one hand, gambling has ruined countless careers, companies and lives. And on the other hand, many of us are drawn to the simple elements of what makes gambling attractive. Information. Risk. Money. Winning.

I regularly check Danny Sheridan's line in USA Today for hoops games, don't I? I played in a fantasy football league with money paid to enter (and money earned for being smart enough to draft Randy Moss), didn't I?

In fact, I even placed a friendly Sugar Bowl wager with Baseball Weekly's Keith Cutler on Syracuse (my alma mater) to beat Florida. The fact that I wasn't smart enough to get Cutler to give me 'Cuse and 30 points might explain why I stay away from gambling.

Too much heart, not enough brains, happily married. That last one carries a lot of influence.

Still, this friendly wagering thing goes on all the time. As Cutler pointed out to me (while yapping about his Gators), politicians do it every bowl season.

Anyway, while gambling may be on the fringe of many lifestyles, a couple of touchstones in my life have kept me away from gambling.

In junior high, a kid who wasn't paying attention bet me that I didn't know the next day's homework assignment. I was right, he was wrong and he paid up. My mistake was bragging about it to my mother. Yeah, you guessed it, she made me give the money back, and the kid mocked me mercilessly. There's your proof of no brains.

The next time I gambled was at the Calgary Stampede. Our family bet on one race (as a form of family entertainment). As the horse came around the final turn, it stumbled, broke a leg and never finished. As my dad explained, "Let this be a lesson to you, son. Burtons aren't cut out for the dogs and ponies."

My other great memory was provided in college. It was delivered via the intense James Caan movie "The Gambler." You might debate the film's artistic merits, but for sheer scare power, it worked wonders on me. I've never forgotten its marketing campaign, either. It went like this:

"For $11,000, they break your arms. For $22,000, they break your legs. Axel Freed owes $44,000."

For my money, it was the "Fatal Attraction" of the '70s. Have an affair, and as Dennis Hopper said in the Nike ads, "Bad things, man. Bad things." This movie showed the downside of gambling was really ugly.

In "The Gambler" (1974), Caan's character is a college professor who gets to a point where he is betting heavily, losing steadily, doubling down to dig himself out and borrowing money from the people who love him. Finally, he catches a "tip" for a basketball game and plunks down the whole wad on the "sure thing."

The next part is what I remember most clearly. The movie's most powerful scene opens with Axel listening to the game on a radio in his bathroom. With his team up by more than the point spread (with just seconds left), Axel believes his ship, his horse, his lucky star, his whatever, has finally come in.

But then, as seems to happen in gambling, the 95 percent free throw shooter bricks the gimme that guarantees the spread. The other guys rebound, whip it downcourt and some nobody banks in a shot from the next zip code.

Slowly, the camera zooms in on Axel as he slumps down next to the toilet. He knows his life is about to get very ugly. Very painful. It's not a pretty sight. That was enough warning for me.

Only in Hollywood, you say? Nahhhh, I think not. The other night here in Eugene, our Oregon Ducks had Southern Cal down by five points with 2.8 seconds left. Game over, right? ENNNH! Thank you for playing.

Suddenly, a nice young Trojan from "outta nowhere" hits a trey from the corner, steals the long inbound pass, jukes forward a step and hits the game-winner from halfcourt. Six points in 2.8 seconds. Happens all the time up here in the Northwest.

For the gamblers around the country, if your money was on the Ducks you don't care that careful video analysis shows the game-winning shot happened after the red light went on.

Doesn't matter. You lost. Pay up.

So I gotta tell you straight, folks, I'm not big on gambling. It works for some. It's fun for others. But I know folks get hurt because they can't stop.

Along the way, reputations get ruined. I know a number of academic institutions, which should be offering college educations and the simple opportunity of playing intercollegiate athletics, now find themselves dealing with fixed games and withering media coverage. The University of Michigan, in fact, just released a study that suggested that 45 percent of male college athletes gamble on sports. More than 5 percent of football and male basketball players indicated they had provided inside information, bet on games in which they played or shaved points.

Sounds like a sucker's play to me.

Thankfully, the NCAA and the major pro sports leagues are aggressive in protecting the integrity of their games. But they can't control everybody all the time.

So where does that leave us? Well, I know that winning is a temporary rush, but certain kinds of losing carry heavy baggage that some people never unload.

To end this tale, I'll tell you this: I'm no purist, so you get no sermon here. I'm like you, I check the line. I'll get in the NCAA office pool every once in a while. But only with friends and never for more than a couple of cheeseburgers.

That's me. I'm risk-averse and my mother knows where I live. Where do you stand?

Rick Burton is director of the Warsaw Sports Marketing Center at the University of Oregon.

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