March 8, 2006

Reader Responses

Some excerpts of reader responses to "[Sad Suspicions About Scores in Basketball]," appear below.

The fix is not always in. In fact, it's rarely in. I find it exasperating you paint Las Vegas sports betting with a broad brush. On one hand, you acknowledge irregularities on Wall Street and leave the reader with a sense of everything is back on track. On the other, you suggest Jay Kornegay is off base and buyer beware. You should have moved up your statement, "This isnt proof, to be sure" and stated, "I have no facts!"

There are a healthy number of Las Vegas professional handicappers making an honest living and venture to say it approaches the integrity of Wall Street.

Dig into the Stevin Smith case at Arizona State. You'll find that the Las Vegas sports gaming community (not Eliot Spitzer) uncovered the case. That system is still in place.

Dan Murphy

I'm not sure we disagree as much as you think we do. If there is point-shaving going on, it doesn't mean the bookmakers are dishonest - or that they can't play an important role in helping to uncover it, as they seem to have done in the Arizona State case. In fact, that is a big argument against making college sports wagering illegal in Las Vegas, as Senator John McCain proposed a few years ago. The legal betting market, which is far smaller than the illegal one, allows investigators (and economists) to study the data.

David Leonhardt

I would offer that shaving can best be accomplished early in the season. The coach didn't know the talent - his and theirs. There are few scouting reports. The team didn't play together much. And the games you referenced pose the best target: "soft" spreads against weak teams.

Now factor in new college morality and video poker, and you have a recipe for a disaster.

Bill Earley

You write: "There is a strange dearth of games in which 12-point favorites win by, say, 13 or 16 points. And there are a lot of games that they win by 11 points or slightly less. There is just no good explanation for this."

I think there is a very plausible explanation. Double-digit leads have always been a psychological barrier for the trailing team, and dictate strategy, attitude and exertion. If less than 10, the game tightens up dramatically, the officials call it tighter, the starters may be reinserted if they have been taken out, or play harder if they have been cruising. If more than 10, the game is not in doubt, the losing team tends to give up, the leading team tends to not choke, etc. Perhaps you could compare Division II scores or other basketball games with no lines and see if you could establish a control group somehow.

It is interesting study, but seems more of the throw-it-on-the-wall-and-hope-it-sticks analysis.

Kenneth A. Guckenberger

Thanks for your note. The cutoff at 12-point spreads was just one example. The research found the same effect when the spread was 15 or 20 points. In other words, there is also a dearth of games in which 15-point favorites win by, say, 16 or 18 points. And there are unusually large number of games that they win by 14 points or slightly less. So it doesn't seem like the "double-digit" effect you describe can explain the results.

David Leonhardt

I am a professional gambler, and in my professional opinion Justin Wolfers has drawn incorrect conclusions from the data he examined in his study of college basketball. It appears he has a fundamental misunderstanding of how lines are set. Specifically, lines are frequently set by public perception rather than the linemaker's skill at analyzing games. As any halfway decent sports bettor knows, the public generally overvalues favorites. To take advantage of this, sportsbooks intentionally set lines that are "off" by a point or so from where they would otherwise be. The fact that many lines are skewed against favorites is the reason why favorites cover the spread less than 50 percent of the time. Since the "real" line is often slightly less than the actual line, it makes sense that many games fail to cover the spread by only a point or two. It's worth noting that the types of games where the public most typically overvalues favorites are games where a popular team is a moderate to heavy favorite against a lesser-known team. This is pretty much the exact subset of games that Mr. Wolfers finds questionable.

Ian Maguire

This is a really important point. Las Vegas casinos often aim to have the same amount of money bet on each team. They then make a profit, from the betting fee, no matter the result of the game. And as Mr. Maguire notes, bettors put their money on favorites more often that they should. These favorites are often teams like Duke or Kansas, which have a large fan base that will bet on them out of loyalty more than anything else. This helps explain why favorites would win less than half the time.

But I don't think it explains Mr. Wolfers's results. He found that big favorites win by a little more than the point spread much less often than slight favorite do. But the big favorites blow away the point spread as often as slight favorites do (a little more often in fact, but that might just be statistical noise). And it's hard to see how the Duke/Kansas theory explains that. If the over-betting of favorites were the only thing going on, big favorites - teams that tend to have a national following - should blow away the spread less often than other teams.

- David Leonhardt

If I wanted to fix a basketball game I wouldn't waste my time trying to meet some college kid who might be interested. Why do that when referees are so much more accessible and whose bad decisions are routinely accepted as incompetence?

Paul Williamson