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## Can the next point-shaving scandal be far off?

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Pakistan is far away and cricket, in the American sports consciousness, literally is an insect. But there is no offshoring the alarm triggered by headlines of a coach's murder and the attendant speculation that the fix was in with the betting mafia.

Especially on Final Four weekend.

It may be a leap to bring dark news from cricket's World Cup, where police say Pakistan's national coach was strangled in his hotel room March 18 following his team's startling upset loss to Ireland, into the same discussion with the giddy NCAA basketball tournament. Probably not, though, given the forever potential of gambling skulduggery.

"If history repeats itself and we have a point-shaving scandal about every decade, we should be on the alert, anyway," said Richard Lapchick, director of the Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport at the University of Central Florida. "What happened with the cricket shows that this still is part of the world of sports, and we'd better pay attention."

It was Lapchick's father, celebrated St. John's University coach Joe Lapchick, who kept a scrapbook on the scandal that tainted CCNY's unprecedented 1950 NIT/NCAA championship double, decimated college basketball in New York City and resulted in charges against 32 players at seven schools nationwide.

Rather than throwing games outright, players were found to have trimmed the margins of victory to accommodate betting spreads, and Joe Lapchick meant for his athletes to study the newspaper clipping "so they would understand what the consequences were," his son said. "All those players who probably had a chance to play in the NBA but weren't able to, how it could affect their livelihoods and even their chances to graduate. He wanted to scare them straight."

Still, point-shaving conspiracies have proved to be a renewable

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resource in college basketball, with major recurrences in 1961 (two Seton Hall players), 1981 (Boston College's Rick Kuhn) and 1994 (two Arizona State players). As with cricket's enormous following on the international stage, NCAA basketball generates the kind of money and wagering interest in this country that renders it a petri dish for corruption. Especially given the relative ease with which a single player can manipulate the final score in that sport.

University of Pennsylvania business and public policy professor Justin Wolfers, using what Wolfers calls "forensic economics," studied every Division I result over a 16-year period and concluded in a 2006 research paper that point shaving occurred in as many as 500 games, roughly 1 percent of the total.

So while the Big Dance continues to happily gin up interest in bracket bets and Las Vegas cites March Madness as the nation's fourth-largest gambling event, the NCAA and many of its member institutions are scrambling to insure that the dice aren't loaded.

"I know that, for years, this is an issue that has the NCAA scared to death," Lapchick said. "They have a huge program on gambling education."

The latest in a series of NCAA surveys currently is attempting to measure how many student-athletes bet on games, take money to throw games or share inside information. The results will be available next year but, as Wolfers said, such research is done through "anonymous surveys; you ask, not, 'Do you do it?' but 'Do you know anyone who does this?' It's very hard to be precise."

In the meantime, FBI agents are in Atlanta for the Final Four and former mob boss Michael Franzese -- whose duties in his previous life with the Colombo crime family included contacting college athletes to arrange point shaving -- these days is on the other side, traveling the nation to lecture players (college and pro) on gambling's dangers.

"To think it isn't happening would be naive," said Franzese, who relates to players how the mob would "threaten guys, get them into debt so there's no way out. Yeah, I tell them stories of what I've gone through. The pros today make so much money, they can lose a bet and cover it, but these kids are so vulnerable."

Wolfers argues for "a regulatory framework. The stock market and the betting market aren't that different, but one -- the stock market -- has a huge paper trail and a regulatory framework, while the other is done through the underworld." He contends that gamblers would "much rather bet with a firm that meets with

a government seal of approval ... and a regulated sector gives everyone a way to catch the bad guys."

But Franzese is skeptical of such a setup, just as he doubts the likelihood of eradicating the root problem, what Wolfers calls the "misaligned incentives of players and gamblers" -- players care about winning, gamblers about the spread.

"That's what entices the bettor and makes it easier for the student athlete to go out and gamble," Franzese agreed. "Somebody tells a kid, 'Here, put five grand in your pocket and lose by seven instead of 10, and who'll know?'

"If, some way, somehow, you could eliminate the lines, you'd have more of a fighting chance. But I don't see that ever happening."

We'd better pay attention, then. Just in case something isn't cricket.

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