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Suspected Point-Shaving Scheme Shows Gambling Remains Persistent Issue

By **PETE THAMEL**

For all of the suspensions, fines and [N.C.A.A.](#) investigations in the past year in college sports, few have posed a threat to the integrity of the games themselves like Monday's announcement that two former University of San Diego basketball players and a former assistant [were among 10 people indicted in a point-shaving scheme.](#)

The federal indictments, which also included charges of illegal bookmaking and [marijuana](#) distribution, raised a vexing question: how often are college basketball games fixed?

"I don't think it's common, but I also don't think that anyone is immune," said Julie Roe Lach, the [N.C.A.A.](#)'s vice president for enforcement. She added, "We are talking about the integrity of college sports when you're talking about this issue."

Opinions vary on just how many games are compromised each year. Justin Wolfers, an associate professor of business and public policy at the [University of Pennsylvania's](#) Wharton School, did [a forensic study of college basketball games](#) and point spreads in 2006. He concluded that point shaving appeared to occur in 5 percent of games with large spreads. In a telephone interview Tuesday, he said that it was hard to pin down a finite number of games that are fixed.

"We're certain that the answer isn't zero," he said, adding, "My guess is it could be as high as 30 games a year."

Wolfers's conclusion comes in part from the statistical "smoking gun" he found in his study, that in games in which a team is favored by, say, 12 points, there is an excess of 10- and 11-point victories and too few 13- and 14-point wins. But he cautioned that the statistical evidence should not be mistaken for [F.B.I.](#) evidence.

"There's a smoking gun, but it shouldn't be taken as more than a smoking gun," Wolfers said.

St. Joseph's Coach Phil Martelli called the San Diego story a "punch in the gut," but still has a hard time imagining that fixing games is commonplace. He said that in an era of instant communication, suspicions would be more frequent.

“I think that there would be more mud flowing through the river with people making accusations,” he said. “People just aren’t quiet and discretionary.”

Federal authorities did not specify which San Diego game or games were compromised, only saying in the indictment that the former San Diego star Brandon Johnson “attempted to influence and influenced the outcome of a U.S.D. basketball game for a monetary bribe” in February 2010. They also said that Thaddeus Brown, an assistant at San Diego in 2006-7, and Brandon Dowdy, who played at San Diego in 2006-7 and transferred to U.C.-Riverside, approached a player at Riverside this season.

Jay Kornegay, the vice president for race and sports book operations at the Las Vegas Hilton, said that one San Diego game from the 2009-10 season raised slight suspicions, and that came on Dec. 4, 2009, when odds on San Diego’s game at U.C.-Riverside opened with San Diego as a 2 1/2-point favorite and closed with San Diego as a 1-point underdog. Riverside won, 58-55. Johnson shot 2 for 10 for San Diego, and Dowdy shot 1 for 4.

“We’re still looking into some other games,” Kornegay said. “We haven’t come up with anything. We haven’t had a chance to go through it thoroughly.”

Gambling on sports has long had the attention of the N.C.A.A., but it has proved difficult to reduce. A [2008 study by the N.C.A.A.](#), showed that 1.6 percent of men’s basketball players said they had been asked to influence the outcome of a game, 2 percent had bet on their own team and 1.4 percent had bet on another team at their own university.

The N.C.A.A. pours hundreds of thousands of dollars each year into gambling prevention. F.B.I. agents speak to the teams in the men’s and women’s Round of 16 of the N.C.A.A. tournament, and a consultant monitors point spreads in Las Vegas. But in a case like San Diego’s, enforcement can be difficult. The San Diego indictments, for example, grew out of an investigation into marijuana distribution.

“I think you hit on a core issue when you’re talking about sports wagering, the fact is that it’s often connected to organized crime in some way,” Roe Lach said. “In trying to uncover a sports-wagering issue, it usually involves a much deeper ring that falls way outside the N.C.A.A.’s jurisdiction.”

