

Student gambling on rise? You bet
Start of NCAA basketball tournament heightens concern over suspicious activity
By David Haugh
Tribune staff reporter

March 15, 2006, 11:10 PM CST

Dion Lee's betting days have long since passed.

So Lee did not want to hazard a guess as to when he finally would be able to watch the NCAA tournament without thinking of the gambling scandal that marred his Northwestern basketball career more than a decade ago.

But odds favor later over sooner.

"I still have it locked in that brain of mine," Lee said in a phone interview Wednesday on the eve of March Madness. "I took my pill and swallowed it. I paid the price, even if I know I could look at every [Northwestern] roster of every sport from 1993-95 and find the names of 50 people who I know for a fact were gambling. It was everywhere."

It still is, to such an extent that gambling rings involving betting on college basketball resulted in arrests at Mt. Carmel, St. Rita and Marist high schools in Chicago in the past week.

The arrests underscore that the bug has begun to afflict kids younger than ever. According to the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania, the percentage of males between the ages of 14 and 22 who gambled each month increased from 48 percent in 2004 to 57 percent last year.

Lee, 32, was sentenced to one month in prison after pleading guilty in 1998 to sports bribery. He believes the gambling epidemic is greater now on college campuses than it was famously at Boston College, Northwestern, Arizona State and other campuses in the 1990s.

The NCAA worries about the same trend, expanding its presentations to teams that qualify for the Sweet 16 rather than limiting those talks to Final Four teams as in the past. Also, for the first time, the NCAA will send an observer to Las Vegas to work with bookmakers to monitor suspicious activity—a dramatic leap for an institution that was working with Capitol Hill to ban gambling on college sports just four years ago.

Thursday's tipoff of the three-week-long NCAA tournament that will generate \$3.5 billion in all forms of betting frightens people familiar with the ills of gambling as much as it excites those in the water-cooler crowd entering multiple brackets in the office pool.

"I call it the silent addiction and it's going to be more prevalent this month than ever," said Alexander Roseborough, the president of the Illinois Council on Problem Gambling. "I still don't think there's as much publicity and awareness as there should be on this problem, maybe because colleges are concerned about the effect it could have on enrollment. But it's real and it's growing."

Internet gambling boom

Nothing has contributed to that growth more than the Internet, where more than \$2 billion in online bets are expected during the NCAA tournament.

The office pools many consider innocent forms of fun generate \$750 million nationwide. The latest craze involves Calcutta auctions where wealthy professionals bid on teams so excessively that one pot in New York approached \$200,000 last year, according to the Wall Street Journal.

The NCAA has responded to the gambling inflation by taking a staunch anti-gaming stance, most notably cracking down on former Washington football coach Rick Neuheisel for filling out a tournament bracket to the extent it cost Neuheisel his job. The NCAA made such a strong statement in that case that a senior NCAA official criticized former gambling enforcement director Bill Saum for being overzealous in an e-mail made public during Neuheisel's trial. Last summer, Rachael Newman-Baker replaced Saum, who was transferred.

Much of the reform attempts have come after an eye-opening survey of NCAA student-athletes released in 2004 that NCAA officials cited again this week in a teleconference.

The survey of 21,000 Division I athletes revealed 17 of 388 men's basketball players (4 percent) admitted bettors had put them in a compromising position either to provide inside information or shave points.

It also showed 17.2 percent of men and 5.9 percent of women wagered on college sports—including 21.2 percent of men's basketball players.

Of the nation's nearly 16 million college students, one out of four gamble, according to the National Council on Problem Gambling.

"It's a daunting task to all college administrators," Northern Illinois director of athletics Jim Phillips said. "It's a reflection of our society. For us to turn a deaf ear to it would be totally irresponsible. It's scary."

Point-shaving concerns

If administrators are scared now, University of Pennsylvania economist Justin Wolfers might make the hair on the backs of their necks stand straight up.

In a soon-to-be-published research paper, Wolfers contends the outcomes of as many as 500 men's college basketball games over the past 16 years have been affected by point shaving.

The Australian, who used to work for bookmakers in his homeland, examined the score differentials of 44,120 games from 1989 to 2005 and concluded that teams favored by more than 12 points missed covering the spread enough to raise suspicion.

He estimated during a phone interview Wednesday that favorites covered the spread 50 percent of the time but "heavy favorites,"—teams favored by 12 or more—covered in only 48.4 percent. Wolfers considered that 1.6 percent difference significant enough to believe players were involved in manipulating the spread.

"If I'm a player, it's impossible for me to care if I win by 11 or 13 points but it matters a lot to a gambler, and that's the opening," Wolfers said. "Point shaving is so easy for the player to do." At least three of those games Wolfers studied involved Northwestern and Lee, who in February 1995 recruited former Wildcats teammates Dewey Williams and Matt Purdy to shave points after former Notre Dame kicker Kevin Pendergast had contacted Lee.

The Wildcats players helped arrange for Northwestern to lose by a margin bigger than the spread in games against Wisconsin and Penn State, earning Lee \$4,000 that Pendergast delivered in an Evanston alley. The scheme fell apart when Northwestern only lost by 17 when the spread was 25, losing \$20,000 for Pendergast and company.

Lee's gambling habit began two years earlier when an investigation into former NU football player Dennis Lundy's involvement revealed Lee had bet on college and pro football games. In all, 11 former Northwestern athletes either were charged or convicted at the conclusion of the investigation. University officials disputed Lee's claim that as many as four times as many athletes were involved.

"Eleven years later, what is the NCAA doing different—they're still showing a video with me on it—and I know it's still going on," said Lee, who lives in his hometown of Louisville. "Why it happened then is why it's going to happen again because as much as they say they pay attention to gambling, I don't think in reality it gets through and kids like me slip through. There's too much money at stake to crack down too hard, and money makes the world go 'round."

dhaugh@tribune.com

Copyright © 2006, [The Chicago Tribune](#)