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## Keeping Score

Christine Brennan

### Threat of point shaving always lurking

It will surprise no one this week to find the words gambling and college basketball in the same sentence. It's that time of year; the games of March Madness often are a thing of beauty, but it's the guessing, and the chance to win a few hundred bucks from your co-workers, that reels in the masses.

Funny how this national obsession of ours is all based on cash exchanging hands, yet we somehow seemed shocked — shocked! — by the thought that perhaps by osmosis, the very players we're betting on might be betting on themselves.

The NCAA disclosed in 2004 the alarming results of a survey that said 4.4% of Division I men's basketball players (17 of the 388 surveyed) reported having taken money for playing poorly in a game, known of a teammate who did, been threatened or harmed because of sports wagering, been contacted by an outsider to share inside information or actually provided inside information on a game.

It isn't difficult to use your imagination and extrapolate that figure of 4.4% to the participants in the 32 men's games that will be played today and Friday. Do the math and wonder: Is it possible that at least one game will be thrown in the next two days?

"The survey served as a great wake-up call to our membership about what is happening with our student-athletes," said Rachel Newman-Baker, NCAA director for agent, gambling and amateurism activities. "No campus can say it's immune to this problem. The most disturbing numbers were those involving men's Division I basketball and football (where 102 of 2,132 said they were involved in some way with wagering contacts). These are the numbers that we are focused on. These are the numbers that affect the well-being of our student-athletes and the integrity of our games."

Just as closeted hoops fans, or people who don't follow basketball at all, become all atwitter over the sport at this time of year, so too do the experts, whose opinions and surveys seem to come out of the woodwork right about now, telling us what is wrong with a sport we often are too quick to love. For those who think that the biggest issues of the tournaments are the Cincinnati men's team being excluded or the North Carolina women's team being thrown to the wolves in its regional, here is reason to think again.

In the last few weeks, light has been shed on a new survey by Justin Wolfers, a business and public policy assistant professor at the University of Pennsylvania. He collected the results of nearly every college men's basketball game over the last 16 years. In an unusually large number of games involving a heavy point-spread favorite, the favorite just missed covering the spread. His research, using economic models, led him to suggest point shaving may be occurring in about 6% of games with large spreads and about 1% of all games.

This has been serious business to the NCAA for some time, Newman-Baker said Wednesday, but it's getting more serious. The NCAA will do more this month than it ever has to try to prevent a game from being thrown by a player.

In a bizarre twist, the NCAA is sending one staffer to Las Vegas to watch the games at the casinos and sports books, "meeting folks, observing, being a sponge," Newman-Baker said. "We're trying to take necessary proactive steps and re-establish a relationship with Las Vegas."

The thinking is that if there are games being thrown, the experts in Vegas will smell a rat from afar and know it first.

Also, for the first time ever, the NCAA will be sending a staff member and an FBI agent into meetings with every men's and women's Sweet 16 team to discuss the evils of wagering. In the past, the NCAA focused on the Final Fours. Now it has quadrupled its efforts.

To its credit, the NCAA is not running from the wagering issue, even as it grapples with the irony of addressing the evils of the very activity that has made the postseason so popular.

"This discussion is something we embrace," Newman-Baker said. "Anytime you get people talking about the issue, you can get the message out there and provide more information to people. It's a great time to discuss this issue. I wish we didn't have to, but the reality is we do."

Talk is admirable, but the reality is the problem is out there. "Money doesn't have to be involved for the NCAA tournament to be enjoyable," Newman-Baker said, and while you know she's right, you still wonder.

If we're all caught up in it, and you know we are, how can a young college basketball player, an athlete with little money to his or her name, not be?

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