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Point-shaving remains a concern in college athletics

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By Michael McCarthy, USA TODAY

When gambler Ghazi "Gary" Manni allegedly bribed University of Toledo running back Harvey "Scooter" McDougle Jr. and other players to rig football and basketball games from 2003-06, he didn't ask them to deliberately lose, according to federal law authorities.

The alleged game-fixer's pitch to McDougle was more insidious — and psychologically effective: Play to win, just by fewer points than the betting line set by the oddsmakers of Las Vegas. Don't beat yourself, beat the spread.

This illegal scam is known as point-shaving. The most common form involves paying athletes on favored teams to win the game — but by fewer points than the betting line.

If the Toledo Rockets football team were favored by 10, Manni would ask players to try to win by nine or fewer, according to an affidavit in the case filed by FBI special agent Brian Max. Manni allegedly would then bet big money on the opponent to "cover the spread." And clean up.

"Is it a huge problem? I wouldn't say that. But it's a continual problem," says Matt Heron, chief of the organized crime section at FBI headquarters in Washington. "It's out there. We know it's out there. Whether we can prove it is a different matter."

Shaving points might seem like a no-harm, no-foul way to make easy money, Heron says. But a college athlete risks his education, future career, even freedom.

Point-shaving is a federal crime. Any player caught shaving points permanently loses NCAA eligibility in all sports and can be arrested and prosecuted.

Just ask Stevin "Hedake" Smith, an ex-team captain of Arizona State who served nearly a year in prison in 1999-2000. He played briefly with the Dallas Mavericks early in 1997, but his NBA prospects disappeared after he pleaded guilty in late 1997 to conspiracy to commit sports bribery for shaving points in four games in 1994.

Some Las Vegas sports gambling experts are suspicious of the Toledo football team's performance in the '05 season. Lopsided betting to one side or the other of a line changes the point spread — and raises questions in the gambling community.

During that season, the lines moved by two points or more on seven games, says RJ Bell, president of Pregame.com. Each time, the bettors driving the changes won. "The odds of that happening randomly are 128-1 ... which tells me these guys knew something."

The "betting patterns" on Toledo during the 2005 season became so suspicious that Nevada's State

 Yes No Yes No Yes No

Gaming Control Board investigated two games, chief enforcement officer Jerry Markling says. After concluding there were no violations by state casinos, the board closed its investigation in December 2005.

McDougle was arraigned March 30 in U.S. District Court in Detroit on charges of participating in a bribery scheme to influence games. He has been suspended from the football team but is still enrolled at school, University of Toledo spokesman Larry Burns says.

The FBI says it is still gathering information to make its case against McDougle. Manni, 50, from the Detroit area, has not been charged.

Once a player gets in with mobsters and gamblers, there's no turning back, warns former gangster Henry Hill, the inspiration for the movie *Goodfellas*, who orchestrated a point-shaving scheme with the Boston College's men's basketball team during the 1978-79 season. Players are forced to continue shaving points until the caper blows up or they're off the team.

Hill vividly recalls the warning he gave the players from New York gangster Jimmy "The Gent" Burke after they botched a point-shaving attempt: " 'Tell those Boston kids they can't play basketball with broken arms.' "

Balancing greed, desire

A less common form of point-shaving involves paying players on underdog teams to deliberately lose by more than the point spread. If the Rockets were predicted to lose by two points, Manni would tell players to lose by three or more, according to the FBI affidavit.

The problem? Even the greediest college athletes are highly competitive, experts say. It's much easier for game fixers to sell them on shaving points while still winning than losing on purpose.

"If the spread is 12 points, he doesn't care if he wins by 10 or 14," says Justin Wolfers, assistant professor of business and public policy at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School.

After studying 44,120 NCAA Division I men's basketball games from 1989 to 2005, he concluded in a research paper last year that 1%, or nearly 500 games, involved "gambling-related corruption."

Point-shaving is easier to pull off and harder to catch than dumping games, says Michael Franzese, who refers to himself as a former Mafia soldier and ex-convict turned anti-gambling crusader. Athletes shaving points can still play hard and win. At key moments they try to manipulate the final score by slacking off on defense, missing free throws or committing a foul.

In an interview with the FBI on Dec. 14, according to the affidavit, McDougle admitted accepting cash, a car, a phone and other valuables from Manni. Also according to the affidavit, McDougle said he shared inside information and introduced Manni to other Toledo football and basketball players who might also be interested.

In the affidavit, McDougle, a 22-year-old senior with no declared major, told the FBI he never changed his play to affect a game's outcome. His best year for the Rockets was in 2004, rushing for 620 yards and seven touchdowns. After knee surgery, he played sparingly in 2005 and '06.

McDougle's attorney, James Burdick, says his client is innocent. The initial criminal complaint against McDougle was dropped April 18. Gina Balaya, spokeswoman for the U.S. Attorney's office in Detroit, says that was done to give the FBI more time to investigate. She says she expects the case to go to a grand jury.

Manni's attorney, Neil Fink, declined to comment. Devlin Culliver, McDougle's coach at Shaw High School in East Cleveland, Ohio, believes "someone tried to corrupt" his star running back: "Scooter is not that kind of kid. Maybe he gave up information he shouldn't have. I'm hoping he didn't."

Five hoops scandals since 1951

Mark Andrews, chairman of the watchdog Casino Watch in Chesterfield, Mo., a suburb of St. Louis, says growing acceptance of wagering, from sports betting to poker, has created the first generation "to grow up thinking gambling is acceptable. Combine that with being in a position of influence, and they will get into trouble real quick."

Scandals involving dumping games have been scarce recently. Recall the eight Chicago White Sox players pocketing bribes to dump the 1919 World Series to the Cincinnati Reds. Or pro boxers taking dives in the ring.

But nearly every college betting scandal of the last 60 years involved point-shaving, such as these in basketball:

- City College of New York, 1951.
- Boston College, 1978-79.
- Tulane, 1985.
- Arizona State, 1994.
- Northwestern, 1995.

Gamblers don't just target players; they target anyone who can help them win a bet, the FBI's Heron says.

During the 2006 NCAA Division I men's basketball tournament, a trainer from one of the teams making the Sweet 16 received a suspicious text-mail message asking for inside information. He reported it to the FBI.

Why a trainer?

"He knows who's hurt, who's healthy, who's got a bum knee," Heron says.

The only way to eradicate point-shaving, Wolfers says, would be to eliminate point-spread betting on college sports.

No plan is perfect

Even game-fixers, however, learn there's no such thing as a sure thing. In an account of the Boston College scheme published by *Sports Illustrated* in 1981, Hill described the strategy:

"We wanted BC to win by less than the betting line when it was favored — and to lose by more than the line when it was the underdog. So we'd always bet on the BC opponent and everything would be perfect. Right?"

Wrong. Despite three BC players on board, Hill says he won his bets on only six of the nine rigged games.

Still, Hill says he made \$480,000; he says the players got a few thousand a game. Their leader, Rick Kuhn, was sentenced to 10 years in prison and ended up serving 28 months. Kuhn could not be reached for comment.

The dirty secret of college sports is how easy it is for fixers to bribe student-athletes who have little or no money, Hill says, especially if the players don't think they have the size or skill to make it in the professional ranks after college.


"Everybody has a number. Everybody is corruptible. I don't care who it is," says Hill, writing a screenplay about the Boston College scam, *Final Four*. "It's just a matter of how much — and how much they think they can get away with.

"You offer a kid 10 large (\$10,000), he's at least going to think about it."

Contributing: Kevin Johnson and Thomas Ankner

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