Gambling is often now a generally acceptable and widely popular element of twenty-first century culture. A major element of this is football betting, with its long traditions, the explosion of football programming on terrestrial and satellite television and the simultaneous updates of scores on mobile phones. But although football betting is touched on in general studies of gambling (e.g. Munting, 1996; Reith, 1999; Sproston, Erens and Orford, 2000; Miers, 2004) or sport economics (Forrest, 2009), academic studies of the complex interrelationships over time between football and gambling are relatively few, largely focusing on the pools (Fishwick, 1989: 117–35; Clapson, 1992: 162–86; Laybourn, 2007: 151–66).

This chapter explores five key areas relating to this complex interrelationship, using the United Kingdom as a case study, but with more global material where appropriate. The areas considered are first, the changing terrain of UK football betting from the 1880s to the present; second, the global dimensions of betting; third, the marketing of football gambling in the UK; fourth, betting’s popular appeal, and finally the societal, religious and football organisation concerns about betting and the fixing of football game results.

The changing terrain of British football betting

Since the beginning of the modern game betting on match results has been ‘an ingrained feature of football’ (Hill, 2002: 149). Mason (1980: 179–81) concluded that betting initially was mostly confined to actual grounds before and during the game, and between individuals. As football became more popular, newspapers recognised that placing betting on an organised footing would aid sales, and from the later 1880s some British regional newspapers began offering prizes of up to around £5 to readers who could correctly forecast the results and winners’ goals of (most commonly) four or five identified matches or the results only of ten or so matches, using a provided coupon.

Regular, calendared Football League fixtures also encouraged bookmakers to issue their own printed fixed-odds football coupons and there was soon a ‘coupon craze’. In 1901 prosecutions by the National Anti-Gambling League forced newspapers to withdraw from the business. But over the next decade a number of fixed-odds bookmakers continued operating, setting up offices in Flushing, Middleburg and various Swiss cities and towns to avoid...
prosecution. Spasmodic prosecutions of their UK offices proved ineffective. By the 1920s bookmakers were trying to evade the law by demanding that the coupon be posted in before 2:45 p.m. on Saturday (so prior to the match), date-stamped by the General Post Office to that effect, and the remittances in a separate envelope no later than 4:45 p.m. They hoped that this would be recognised as a credit bet and so be legal, but the attempt failed. Despite regular prosecutions of printers and bookmakers in the next few years, and the post-1918 economic difficulties there is general agreement that football coupon betting continued to increase. Despite threats of prosecution even some newspapers briefly returned to coupon betting to increase circulation and raise revenue. Others began introducing spot-the-ball competitions, showing a match photograph with the ball omitted, as this could be represented as a skill competition and therefore legal. The competition slowly became part of the fabric of football history, helping establish football as Britain’s national game across class, gender and families.

Pool betting, which took a percentage of the total receipts as commission and charged all running costs before distributing the rest to winners, seems to have emerged circa 1921/2 but John Moores, of Littlewoods, proved the most effective of its bookmaker exponents. Beginning in Manchester in 1922, the firm expanded rapidly in the years after it moved to Liverpool in 1923. Vernons set up their Liverpool-based pools system in 1925.

The Royal Commission on Lotteries and Betting of 1932/3 recommended banning the pools, then described as ‘combination football betting’, and the 1934 draft Betting and Gaming Act included this clause. But public resistance forced its removal, and this became what was soon called ‘the Pools Charter’. By the 1930s there were up to 100 firms across Britain. In 1936 just one Edinburgh credit bookmaker, operating Everyman’s Penny Pools and Staunch Totaliser Football Pools, employed ‘approximately 10,000 collectors in different parts of the United Kingdom’ (The Times, 14 January 1937: 4), but most relied on postal orders and coupons delivered by the General Post Office, a very substantial addition to the Postmaster General’s revenues.

The pools companies operated on a legal credit basis, requiring payment a week in arrears, and the leading companies, operating as the Football Pools Promoters Association, ensured defaulters were few. These pools companies sometimes also operated legal credit betting on dogs and horses, and occasionally illegal postal and street ready money betting too (Chinn, 2004: 120).

During the Second World War, many London and South Wales companies stopped trading. Littlewoods, Vernons and some smaller companies continued under the name Unity Pools, using coupons printed in the national press. The industry’s annual profits had been £22 million in the 1938/9 season but were less than £5 million by 1945 (Laybourn, 2007: 159–60). Unity pools then disbanded, and competition renewed.

For the 1946/7 season Littlewoods shifted its emphasis from the earlier ‘penny pools’, ‘four homes’ or ‘four aways’ to the treble chance of 24 points from eight selected matches, producing much longer odds but higher-value prizes. This helped raise postal order sales to clients from 60 million in 1945/6 to 160 million by the end of the season. Attempts at summer pools using Australian games began in 1947, and became general from 1951, although the market was never large. By 1950 the pools firms were receiving £60 million annually. They employed a total national workforce of 23,500, mainly in Liverpool, just less than 90 per cent of them women (Clapson, 1992: 166–7).

Governmental revenue-raising saw the introduction of a 1947 pool betting duty of 10 per cent, slowly increased to 30 per cent by 1949, on top of company tax on subsequent profits (Laybourn, 2007: 160). This had little impact on the pools companies. By contrast a Conservative 25 per cent tax on fixed-odds stakes was unhelpful. Larger bookmakers like William Hill and Littlewoods began issuing fixed-odds coupons on individual matches and double matches based
on form, three wins/draws from a list, and accepting credit bets. From the early 1960s, for such
gerger organisations, the minimum number of matches linked to a single bet was three. Hills
took £16 million in 1963, but then became involved in a ‘betting war’ with Ladbrokes, each
briefly attempting to offer unrealistically better odds than their rival, forcing a decline until

Royal commissions on gambling in 1949/51 and 1976/8 had little impact on football
gambling, although there was some consideration given to a football levy on the pools.
Littlewoods introduced their own highly popular collector network, collecting money from
homes, in 1957, and by the 1970s collectors were unionised in Football Pools Collectors Union.

For the penny pools a ‘jackpot win’ was about £10,000 in the late 1920s, perhaps £22,000
in the 1930s, and reached £64,000 in 1946. Treble chance jackpots reached £100,000 in 1950,
£200,000 in 1957, £300,000 in 1959, £400,000 in 1971, £500,000 in 1972, £750,000 in
1979 and in 1986 nursing sister Margaret Francis and ten of her colleagues from Devizes,
Wiltshire shared £1,017,890. In 1991 it was £2,000,000 and in 1994 the Yew Tree Pub
syndicate in Manchester scooped £2.94 million. From 1963 onwards, a panel of experts
determined for gambling purposes the results of soccer matches in Britain which were included
in the football pools weekly game but which could not be played because of adverse weather
(Forrest and Simmons, 2002).

As late as 1988, over one-third of adults (and a majority of men) in Britain were taking part
in football pools, and popularity peaked in 1994. The introduction of the National Lottery in
1996 led to a rapid decline in pools revenue and numbers of players (Forrest 1999), and a return
to popularity of fixed-odds betting. The number of people playing the football pools has now
fallen to something under a million. The decline, while largely put down to the success of
the National Lottery, has also been due to the rise of the much more cost-conscious ‘Betfair
generation’ who have avoided the football pools. In 2000, Littlewoods Pools was sold for
£161 million. The company is now part of Littlewoods Gaming, a division of Sportech plc,
which bought Zetters Pools in 2002 and Vernons in 2007, and rebranded the pools. By the later
1990s British gamblers gambled, at a conservative estimate, up to £1 billion per annum on
football, including pools, individual match betting and the new forms of spread betting (Sharpe,
1997), and the abolition of UK betting tax on winnings in 2001 gave a further boost.

The international dimension

Football gambling is a global phenomenon. Sweden already had an illegal football pools industry
by the 1920s, initially using local matches. In 1932 Littlewoods and other British pools
companies penetrated the Swedish market. In response, the Swedish government, already
moving towards a more regulated legal gambling market, decided to introduce a government-
controlled Swedish Football Pools Service, AB Tipstjänst, in 1934. Its profits were devoted to
the improvement of Swedish sporting facilities (Norberg, 2009).

After 1945, other countries too channelled gambling profits into sport. The Spanish pools,
La Quiniela, where entrants predicted the results of 14 matches, were introduced in the 1946/7
season, and run by the government. Revenues after costs and prize money deductions initially
went to charity organisations, and from the 1950s onwards were devoted to the promotion of
sport and to special events like the 1982 Football World Cup, with demand peaking in the
1970s (Garcia et al., 2008). Norway and Finland (both 1948) and Denmark (1949) also
introduced state-controlled football pools (Munting, 1996). In the 1950s Norwegian pools
profits went first to scientific research councils and second to sport promotion. Pools quickly
became popular in much of Europe. By the late 1950s, football pools, Sport-toto or Totocalcio
were being run for the benefit of sport in European countries such as Germany, Austria, Italy, Switzerland and the Netherlands, and were being privately run in Belgium. More recently the European Football Pool was formed with various European state soccer lotteries participating in projects with UEFA, especially in its Intertoto Cup.

Israeli newspaper football coupon competitions began c.1951, and between 1955 and 1957 two large profitable organisations Toto Kaduregel and Sportoto Israel emerged, modelled on Littlewoods, with profits channelled into sport. From 1967 sports gambling was organised and conducted by the Israeli Sports Gambling Council, dominated by representatives of Israel’s FA, Sports Association and Olympic Committee, and it now runs Winner-Tote, using Israeli and English football fixtures. A Sport Gambling Council survey in 1970 revealed that about 48 per cent of Israel’s population gambled on soccer results at least occasionally (Levy and Galily, 2009: 96).

Even in countries where football betting long remained illegal after the Second World War, as in a number of Britain’s overseas colonies, there was sometimes a brisk trade in postal betting, causing worries about currency export. A Football Pools Betting Bill to legalise pools in Hong Kong failed in 1960. The wholly government-owned Singapore Pools began in 1968, again using profits for community purposes, especially elite sport. Australia passed its Soccer Football Pools Act only in 1975. Singapore Pools was allowed to offer odds on football matches, initially on local soccer, from 1998. The Hong Kong Jockey Club began taking bets on English football games in 1993. As national lotteries were introduced, they began to cut into pools revenue. In Spain, for example, a lotto game introduced in 1985 cut pools income by almost 80 per cent, and the Spanish football pools now only represent 2 per cent of Spain’s gambling turnover (García et al., 2008: 169). But from the early 1990s onwards, there was a major global expansion of the fixed-odds football betting market. In the late 1990s Gibraltar-based Victor Chandler opened up online internet football betting, challenging the dominance of Coral, Ladbrokes and William Hill, and Italy’s Snaisports made inroads from 2000. These initiatives, widely copied, took football betting into new markets. In the Far East, industry estimates now suggest a combined legal and illegal turnover of over $1 billion a week in season, about half on English Premier League games (Forrest, 2009: 42).

Advertising gambling

Companies gave significant attention to advertising football gambling. Newspapers marketed coupons strongly to boost sales. In 1928 the Sheffield Telegraph coupons offered ‘a golden opportunity’, ‘a thousand pounds for a scrap of paper’, ‘a bungalow or anything else costing a thousand pounds’ (The Times, 22 November 1928). The pools companies spent approximately £500,000 on advertising in the 1930s, mostly after the Pools Charter, in the sporting and popular press, commercial radio, and at football games and match programmes (Munting, 1996: 131), though the FA banned the latter. Between 1936 and 1939 Littlewoods always sent out two coupons (one for a friend) and its Sports Log emphasised ‘Littlewood Loyalty’, sociability, friendship and happiness, with pictures of happy winners, cartoons, football features and facts, and horoscopes, palmistry and tips by ‘Little ol’ man o’ the woods’. Vernons also issued a weekly bulletin magazine with features aimed at the whole family. The Littlewoods and Vernons Pools were a staple of commercial radio too, with 50 hours a week of pools-sponsored programmes in Europe, often on Radio Luxembourg, received in Britain. Pools journalism proliferated, with long feature articles on the subject.

Similar means of advertising were continued after 1945. Leading firms organised choirs to foreground their names, and in the late 1950s the singing combo the Vernons Girls performed
Football and gambling

on TV, providing feedback and publicity. Pools images became ubiquitous in Britain, advertised on commercial radio and in the press. They were a staple of popular newspaper cartoons, with consistent themes: the many ‘inappropriate’ places to complete a coupon, escape from work and what the ‘big win’ might buy, and the awful consequences of failing to post a coupon. In the cinema, newsreel coverage by British Movietone News and others regularly portrayed happy working-class winners and their families. As the stuff of television comedy like Hancock’s Half Hour (‘Football Pools’, 27 November 1959) or British films like the pre-1937 The Penny Pool, the light-hearted satirical comedy Easy Money (1947) or Home and Away (1956) they echoed people’s lives. Coverage generally represented pools in culturally structured and fairly consistent ways: the potential social impact of new wealth; its testing of human nature, personal morality and character; positive and adverse consequences; and the role of luck.

Advertisements concerning supposedly successful methods of achieving winning results, based on mathematical permutations and/or the study of form first appeared in the nineteenth century, but proliferated between the wars. A Radio Luxembourg advertisement in the 1950s and early 1960s by ‘King of the Pools’ Horace Batchelor, based in Keynsham, Bristol, who spent up to £50,000 annually advertising his ‘Amazing Infra-draw method’ became a memorable icon of the period.

Pools advertising increasingly emphasised its long traditions alongside the big life-changing win. In the twenty-first century, television and online campaigns by the New Football Pools exploited this heritage theme, with straplines such as ‘Football just gets better and better; so do the Football Pools’ or ‘the Beautiful Game’, linked to iconic moments of football history, to extend awareness beyond established customers, before rebranding itself as ‘The Football Pools’. And by the 2007/8 season six of the English Premier League clubs had accepted betting companies as shirt sponsors (Forrest et al., 2008: 156).

Gambling and the public

Football pools were popular right across all classes and generations, especially among the upper-working and lower-middle classes (Clapson, 1992: 174–9; Laybourn, 2007: 151–68). In the 1950s weekly stakes averaged two shillings and sixpence (12.5p) or slightly more depending on survey results. Stakes tended to rise with real wage levels, but were regular and small or moderate in amount, often part of a controlled and relatively unproblematic everyday domestic routine. About one in five women completed coupons, more than any other gambling medium, but usually staked less than men, a very limited, ‘acceptable’ element of the household budget. The Catholic Church saw the pools as a national pastime generally beneficial to family life, and its largely working-class parish priests, with few theological and moral objections, often raised money for approved causes through lotteries and football pools. Reports suggest that in some parishes their pools turnover was about £1,000 a week, with about 25 per cent kept back by the church and the rest distributed in prize money (Chinn, 2004: 194). Nationally, surveys such as the Hulton Readership Survey (1949–52), the Social Survey on Betting (1951), the Royal Commission on Betting Lotteries and Gaming (1949/51), or the annual Church Committee on Gambling reports indicated that up to 14 million Britons, perhaps half the adult population, were involved in filling in coupons during the season, with an average of about 7.75 million coupons weekly. They consistently showed that the football pools were widely seen as a harmless little flutter, not ‘real’ gambling, and that the great majority of gamblers did not spend money recklessly.

Football betting offered emotional thrills and psychological rewards for low financial risk. Surveys of pools’ popularity were unsurprisingly clear that for the working classes it was
sometimes a survival strategy, offering a temporary escape from poor pay and conditions, or from the ‘rut’ or monotony of working life. Married women found the pools attractive because they could imagine purchases for themselves rather than the home and (sometimes extended) family. The ‘big win’ appeared to be a realistic way out of everyday anxiety, hard times or financial stress. ‘Poolites’ were buying a small hope (or a dream) each time they entered, even when the odds against winning rose with the size of the jackpot. Conversations about the pools formed part of family, neighbourhood, community, pub and workplace conversation and gossip. There was an element of peer pressure to take part, especially for workplace syndicates.

Pre-1939 effort, skill and football knowledge were believed to affect results, a view reinforced by popular press characterisations of the pools ‘expert’ as well informed about the current capacity and shape of football teams. With the arrival of the treble chance and larger jackpot prizes, odds lengthened and there was increased superstitious emphasis on chance, fate and luck. Some pools entrants used form knowledge, but many others stuck to the same numbers each week.

In the 1960s, alongside the move from austerity to growing prosperity in Britain, pools appeared to offer the prospect of a more frivolous and excessive lifestyle. This was encapsulated in media representations of Viv Nicholson, a young working-class woman from Castleford in Yorkshire, who in 1961 won £151,319 on the pools from a 17.5 pence entry, and at the press conference to announce her win, vowed to ‘Spend, spend, spend’.

She became a notorious profligate, spending money on luxuries to the disgust of moralists, and soon after her husband died when his Jaguar crashed in 1965, her fortune had dwindled away, and her words had become a cliché of gloriously conspicuous consumption, though she herself claimed that it had all been very enjoyable and she had no regrets.

Fixed-odds betting has often attracted significant sentiment in the betting market, with supporters backing ‘their’ side, demonstrating support, but perhaps with the decision on how much to bet conditional on value (Forrest and Simmons, 2008). Fixed-odds betting appeared as an amusing way of adding to the fun of games, though often with more support for home wins. Football spread betting has more multiple appeals. It is simple, quick, easily accessible, and can be done on the internet, computer or mobile phone. Fans often take pride in their football knowledge, and it is possible to bet during play and therefore provides more adrenaline rush. So it appeals to both regular gamblers and those liking an occasional flutter, since with the right choice of bet the odds can provide a significant return for a small stake.

**Opposition to football gambling**

Gambling has always divided society. In the UK, opposition to football gambling was at its strongest in the early twentieth century, especially in areas like Presbyterian Scotland, and organisations such as the National Anti-Gambling League tried to ban it (Dixon, 1991: 165–6). Some newspaper editors and many Liberal politicians were also opposed. In Britain the Labour Party opposed gambling as a matter of principle up to the Second World War. In wider society opposition gradually weakened alongside the growth of secularism. Some anti-gamblers stressed the perceived dangers of pathological, addictive, problematic and underage gambling and their negative effects. Many saw it as socially dangerous and demoralising, and painted punters as thriftless, wasteful, reckless and weak-willed (Gulland, n.d.). Social reformers and nonconformist groups were particularly active. The Churches’ Council on Gambling, founded in 1933, an ecumenical committee drawn mainly from the Anglican and nonconformist churches, continued to gather data on sports gambling and produce annual reports pointing out gambling’s extent and dangers until 1978.
The BBC refused to broadcast the early-evening classified football results until 1948, forcing families to turn to continental stations for the weekly ritual results check. Before the Second World War, Home Office ministers were usually opposed to gambling. Behind the scenes, civil service officials were already often more pragmatic, accepting both the strong feelings of the anti-gambling groups and the widespread public support for small-scale betting which meant that any action had potential political implications.

Within football, many English FA and Football League officials were opposed to betting for moral, religious, ethical, economic or social reasons, and keen to keep gambling out of ‘their’ sport. There were regular FA Council and county AGM concerns about ‘the betting nuisance’ or ‘betting vice’. From 1902 the English FA prohibited players from betting. In 1907 a rule (later Rule 43) was introduced to ensure any club official, referee, linesman or player proved to have taken part in football betting were to be permanently suspended from taking part in football or its management. In 1913/14 the English FA, with the support of the Welsh, Scottish and Irish FAs, unsuccessfully attempted to get the writing, printing or circulating of any advertisements, circulars or coupons relating to ready money football betting banned. In 1920 the English FA, with Home Office support, induced Parliament to pass the Ready Money Football Betting Act, though it was loosely drawn and occasionally ambiguous. The four UK Football Associations presented evidence to the 1932/3 Royal Commission on Lotteries and Betting, urging it to ban all forms of football coupon betting as supposedly undesirable and potentially dangerous. The English FA’s spokesman identified three occasions in 30 years where players had been the tool of bookmakers. The Scottish FA wanted football pools made illegal, citing cases where professional footballers had been bribed, or bookmakers attempted to fix matches.

The Commission’s initial report concluded that registered bookmakers should be allowed to conduct football combination fixed-odds betting but recommended banning the pools. When the government failed to act, the FA took a harder line in continued opposition than the Football League, where a minority felt that the copyright of the League’s fixture list was being taken by the pools companies without any recompense, and that for a fee they might allow it. In 1936 the League, with FA support, briefly attempted to destroy the pools companies by withholding fixture lists so that coupons could not be issued. The so-called ‘pools war’ quickly ended in humiliating failure (Huggins, 2013). An attempt by the FA to get parliamentary action also failed (Clapson, 1992: 170).

After 1945 the English FA and League slowly saw the financial potential of a working relationship with gambling (Laybourn, 2007: 168–9). Following the Small Lotteries and Gaming Act of 1956 supporters’ clubs began running small pools and lotteries to raise money. In 1958 the Football League accepted a fee for fixture lists. In 1965 the pools promoters paid the FA for the FA Cup fixture list. Thereafter football administration had a growingly close relationship with football. But while filling in the pools has relatively low gambling addiction potential, political moves from containment to derestriction of restraints on other forms of football gambling and their market-led commercial and global expansion carry with them potential problems, and have attracted renewed opposition (Orford, 2011).

Gambling-related corruption, match-fixing and match manipulation

Gambling provides an incentive for potential corruption. If players or referees conspire to ensure a particular result, it strikes at the heart of fair, competitive and unpredictable sporting action. It puts football’s reputation, integrity and credibility under pressure. Once perceived as endemic, it can affect stadium attendance, sponsorship and television and press coverage as it has to an extent in countries such as Singapore or Malaysia. It generates concern and threatens
Mike Huggins

confidence in football’s future. Most recently the Chinese professional leagues have been majorly affected by gambling and match-fixing scandals, leading to the loss of sponsor Pirelli and China Central Television (IRIS, 2012). Corrupt football betting is a legal and financial crime. It defrauds other bettors and bookmakers. It strikes at the heart of football’s cultural significance to society, and notions of ‘fair play’.

Betting offered temptation to working-class semi-professional players from football’s very beginnings. Their pay was often low, as was any extra win bonus, and winning depended on factors sometimes outside players’ control. So the ‘arrangement’ of a result, possibly in collusion with a bookmaker, who could offer over-generous odds on a result that would never happen, offered more reliable income.

After 1906 in Britain match-fixing became a criminal offence under the Prevention of Corruption Act, while FA rules enabled them to ban anyone within football involved in complicity to manipulate results. In one particularly notorious case dealt with by the FA and Football League, Liverpool matches began attracting suspicion in the immediate pre-1914 period. Then in 1915 during a game against Manchester United, Liverpool forwards played badly and Manchester players stopped trying once leading 2–0. It was alleged that a number of players had placed bets on this specific result, though such betting was rare. Some players from both sides were involved, kicking the ball out, or not giving good passes to uninvolved colleagues. Following investigations several players were banned. In 1918 a former Manchester United player, George Anderson, who had acted as a go-between for Scottish gamblers seeking corruptible players in northern England, was prosecuted and received an eight-month sentence. Match-fixing also surfaced between the wars, with occasional police prosecutions. Scottish examples included a 1924 case when two players acted as front men for bookmakers to fix a second division match, a 1926 attempt to bribe a Stenhousemuir goalkeeper, and the attempted fixing of a Montrose match in 1932 (Inglis: 1985).

A more widely publicised British case came to light in the early 1960s when investigative journalists reported ‘confessions’ older players had sold to them or accounts of ‘approaches’ regarding match-fixing. Reports suggested that end-of-season fixing of promotion and relegation matches was quite common but that most fixes were connected with betting, often using doubles which offered better odds. Some were individual fixes, but between 1961 and 1963 an extensive largely northern England network of players was operating a betting syndicate making about £1,000 a week, cooperating with bookmakers and middlemen, using double and triple bets. There were unsubstantiated hints of others operating in Wales and the south. About 100 players were probably involved. Initially the FA and League Management Committee did little, and inexcusably refused any enquiry. Police investigations were piecemeal. Eventually 30 individuals were prosecuted, and 12 were convicted and banned by the FA (Inglis, 1985). Two Sheffield Wednesday England internationals were among those implicated in fixing a game against Ipswich, in order to make £100 by betting against their team.

How easy is fixing? Gambling match-fixers have to organise ways of placing their bets to avoid alerting bookmakers and raising suspicions in the betting market. That can be difficult. Goalkeepers and defenders can concede early goals by regular defensive mistakes and underperformance, thus avoiding alerting club, supporters or governing bodies (Sharpe, 1997: 88). Giving away a penalty, bad passes, own goals or getting sent off are possible tactics. Most fixes created by criminal gambling groups started by gaining access to potentially corrupt players before an initial setting up and subsequent firming up of the fix. Following a satisfactory match performance, a payment would then be made. Such corrupt networks appeared well governed either by coercion or by trust. A single potentially corruptible senior player, whose connections to the fixer might have already been carefully created if time permitted, through meetings in
nightclubs or creation of heavy gambling debts would often be approached to organise a corrupt network within the team (Hill, 2009). Sometimes, as in the recent cases of match-fixing in European leagues, Chinese gambling syndicates used player-agents to gain access to players.

As the betting market expanded in the later twentieth century, so did corruption reports. Italian gamblers attempted to fix Serie A matches in the 1979/80 season. In 1984, Belgian gamblers tried to influence a UEFA Cup semi-final result. In the mid 1990s, two British goalkeepers, Bruce Grobbelaar and Hans Seegers, were charged but not convicted on several accounts of match-fixing after Grobbelaar was filmed discussing arranging matches with a member of a Malaysian betting syndicate (Thomas, 2003). In 1995, in an area of reportedly high levels of corruption, a number of Malaysian and Singaporean football players were found to be arranging results, as they also were in the Turkish super-league game in 2005.

Referees are also potentially corruptible, since less well paid than professional players. After being ‘turned’ by an organised Croatian crime syndicate, German football referee Robert Hoyzer manipulated several fixtures in the 2nd Bundesliga and German Cup in 2004 by awarding debatable penalties and red cards. His evidence suggested other referees and players were involved. In Italy, FIFA-ranked referees supposedly hidden away from the public in a maximum-security compound in central Rome still received phone calls offering bribes. More rarely even technicians have been involved. In the UK, in 1997, two English Premier League games were abandoned when the floodlights were sabotaged and it emerged that technicians had been bribed by an Asian betting syndicate. Coaches picking weak teams, medical staff providing wrong treatment or the spiking of drinks are also potentially possible.

State-owned betting controls, regional bans or anti-betting legislation are difficult to enforce following the emergence of more competitive, cheaper, easy-to-access, globally available internet betting exchanges and mobile telephone betting. These have dramatically transformed the nature and seen substantial growth in volume of the betting environment, most especially in Asia. Punters can now place bets not only on a single result, but on ‘live’ match features such as numbers of red cards issued, next player to score or be sent off or number of corners. These ‘proposition’ bets are now a major proportion of the market, and are very open to criminal manipulation. Money on the final result can be fed in through the match, avoiding bookmaker limits on individual bets, and only one player or a referee needs to be corrupted. In countries such as China or India, almost all betting is illegal, yet demand is huge, illegal betting well organised, and money is channelled upwards through agents, eventually reaching a small number of supra-national legal licensed Asian organisations operating in a very weakly regulated environment. This very high liquidity, with vast numbers of anonymous, undetectable and untraceable bets, has created far more opportunities by criminals for match-fixing. Larger financial returns have led to a shift from more individualistic, localised fixes towards greater involvement by large criminal organisations that are perhaps also more ruthless in their expectations.

How common it is, its seriousness and its pace of growth are all difficult to assess. Governments, regulators and football’s governing bodies are all concerned but are unsure how to respond: restrictions on betting have always failed. With the expansion of the betting market, far larger potential profit accrues to cheating, and bets are less detectable. Foreign betting websites are freely available and almost impossible to police, as are any illegal settings. Even with circumstantial evidence of a fix, finding sufficiently firm material to convince a court of law is problematic, even though governing bodies can ban the individuals concerned.

Football’s international governing bodies increasingly recognise that harsh punishments are not enough and are increasingly lobbying police, governments and gambling regulators to do more. Harsher policing regimes and well-staffed anti-corruption units are appearing. In Europe,
Interpol now has a unit dealing with sports corruption. More international cooperation is still needed, since, while a few countries, including Italy, Turkey, the United Kingdom and Spain have legislation making sports corruption a penal offence, many have not. Licenced betting operators can at best monitor suspicious transactions and report them to football’s governing bodies. Better internal investigating, raising player awareness of the potential career consequences of betting and criminal methods of creating involvement, last-minute appointment of specific match officials, closer monitoring of individual performance of players and officials, and instant review of controversial issues are all beginning to be considered.

The likelihood of a fix is greater where the risk of detection and wages of those involved are both low, and matches are less important. The salaries of top soccer players are sufficiently large that the risk of being caught and banned from football and consequent future earnings becomes a major consideration. Dishonesty in major matches also risks prize money, glory and reputation. But less well-paid individuals, such as referees or lower division players, are far more vulnerable. Very large bets can be placed on lower division matches without being noticed, as former limits on amounts staked have been eroded since bookmakers can now rapidly hedge large bets globally. Monitoring of gambling websites to track suspicious movements suggests that perhaps 1 per cent of European league/cup games are fixed, about 300 games a year (Forrest, 2012). A 2013 Europol investigation uncovered an Asian crime syndicate suspected of fixing 380 matches in Europe alone, and 300 others, with 425 individuals implicated. More concerted efforts are now being made to address soccer gambling corruption at domestic, European and international levels. Article 6 of UEFA’s General Terms and Conditions for Referees includes a statement that any referee who is the target or considered to be the target of attempted bribery shall notify UEFA immediately. In 2010 FIFA imposed lifetime bans on a Ukrainian football referee who had not reported repeated contacts with members of a criminal match-fixing group and for others involved in betting fraud relating to a UEFA Europa League fixture on 5 November 2009. In 2011 at another trial in Germany nine defendants were sentenced for affecting 320 results in ten countries. There were other trials in Finland, Belgium, Italy and elsewhere.

Football clubs’ internal governance and financial management can be weak. Some clubs are run by corrupt individuals, who can potentially recruit corrupt personnel. Criminals could potentially move to purchasing clubs, putting on arranged matches. And for clubs in financial straits more money may be made by betting means than on the uncertainty of progressing in a competition. UEFA, for example, banned a Macedonian football club president who attempted to influence his team’s performance in a Champion’s League qualifying match, selling the information to criminals.

To sum up, football betting has seen very significant growth in the past decades. Factors such as ever-larger prizes, reduced taxation, new betting technologies, greater soccer coverage and more betting facilities on television, phones and internet have led to football betting becoming perhaps now the leading global betting medium. But such changes have also led to new opportunities for criminals to fix matches and football’s often fragile finances make clubs ever more vulnerable. Clubs, national and international governing bodies and police forces need to be increasingly vigilant against corruption for the sake of football’s future general health and continued global popularity.

References

Football and gambling


