

## **Student-Athletes and Gambling: An Analysis of Attitudes Towards Risk-Taking**

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Gambling scandals at Arizona State University, Boston College, and Northwestern University have made gambling prevention a point of emphasis in the NCAA and throughout colleges and universities across the nation. Despite this emphasis, there is minimal research at any level regarding gambling and student-athletes. This research examines attitudinal differences towards risk-taking among student-athletes who gamble on college sports and those who indicate no such gambling activity. Our findings indicate that student-athletes who gambled were more likely to have attitudes supportive of risk taking behavior than their student-athlete peers who did not gamble.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Recent, highly publicized incidents of gambling activity involving student-athletes from Arizona State University, Boston College, and Northwestern University have caught the attention of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), officials of its member institutions, the press, and the nation's fans of intercollegiate athletic competition. Adding fuel to this fire of concern about student-athlete gambling behavior is the proliferation of legalized gambling in states around the

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country. Furthermore, access to gambling continues to increase because of the constant growth of internet based gambling (Crist, 1998). Now, more than ever, student-athletes have opportunities to be exposed to and engage in gambling activity, both legal and illegal.

The concern about gambling by college athletes stems from the substantial economic investment of colleges and universities and associated businesses in intercollegiate athletics. Ultimately, the integrity of college sports and the continuation of the associated economic rewards depend on the assurance that the games are being played straight. Yet, relatively little research has been published about gambling behavior among student-athletes. Thus, the goal of this exploratory study is to contribute to a better understanding of student-athlete gambling and to encourage more extensive research that may lead to preventive measures in the future.

### THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

A wide range of theories regarding the psychology of risk-taking behavior (e.g., Trimpop, 1994, Yates, 1992) has been published recently. One particularly intriguing explanation for risk-taking was the need to experience extraordinary sensations (Zuckerman, 1969). This theory postulates that people possess different levels of interest in seeking sensation. This difference in sensation-seeking was characterized as a trait and is defined “. . . by the need for varied, novel, and complex sensations and experiences and willingness to take physical and social risks for the sake of such experiences” (Zuckerman 1979). High sensation seekers were more likely to participate in risky sports (e.g., body contact sports) than low sensation seekers (Zuckerman, 1983). Also, high sensation seekers were more likely to make high risk bets in simulated gambling situations. Zuckerman's combined work along with the findings of Walker (1992), Lesieur et al. (1991), and Brengelmann (1990) provided the conceptual framework for our research.

This study examined differences in attitudes towards risk-taking among student-athletes. Our selection of attitudes towards risk-taking as a potentially salient predictor of gambling was based on the plausible relationship between the attitudes towards risk-taking and gambling. The purpose of this study was to identify, through secondary

data analysis, if attitudes towards risk-taking behavior were more permissive among football and men's basketball players who engaged in gambling on college sports than among their peers who did not gamble on college athletic events.

## METHODS

### *Subjects*

The data for this study was derived from a survey that was mailed to 2000 randomly selected football ( $n = 1000$ ) and men's basketball ( $n = 1000$ ) student-athletes from NCAA Division I schools nationwide. The original study was conducted for the NCAA by Cullen and Latessa (1996). The final sample consisted of 648 football and men's basketball players, a response rate of 32.4%. The respondents were split almost evenly with basketball student athletes forming 51.2% of the sample. The vast majority of respondents received an athletic grant-in-aid (84.8%), and the primary racial background of the sample was 54.6% white and 40.5% African-American.

### *Risk-Taking Attitude Variables*

Within the context of the survey instrument, there were four variables that indicated the respondent's attitudes towards risk-taking behavior. The variables were: 1) I like to test myself every now and then by doing something a little risky, 2) Sometimes I will take a risk just for the fun of it, 3) I sometimes find it exciting to do things for which I might get into trouble, and 4) Excitement and adventure are more important to me than security.

Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with each individual statement regarding risk-taking activity. The responses to the survey items were stated in terms of agreement or disagreement with each statement using a 6 point Likert scale. A response of one (1) indicated strong disagreement with the statement and a response of six (6) indicated strong agreement with the statement. Cronbach's index revealed a satisfactory level of internal consistency ( $\alpha = .80$ ) among the four variables.

The four variables cited above were combined into a single new

variable with a scale of 4 to 24. A score of four indicates the lowest level of permissiveness towards risk taking and a score of 24 indicating the highest comfort with risk taking.

### *Gambling Variables*

This research incorporates two questions concerning gambling behavior. The questions are: 1) "While you have been in college, have you gambled money on other college sporting events?" and 2) "While you have been in college, have you gambled money on a game in which you played?" It is important to note that for the purposes of this study, no distinction was made regarding the amount bet on a particular game, or with whom a bet was placed (e.g. with friends as opposed to more organized gambling interests such as a bookmaking operation). However, the NCAA's "zero tolerance" stance towards gambling activities bans all betting on college sports, making no distinction as to the amount or persons involved.

Cullen and Latessa's original research indicated that 25.5% (161 respondents) of college student-athletes gambled on intercollegiate athletic events, not including games in which they have participated. In addition, 3.7% (23 respondents) of the student-athletes indicated they gambled on a sporting event in which they participated.

## RESULTS

Means testing was used to determine differences in attitudes towards risk taking between football and men's basketball student athletes who indicated they gambled on college sports (gamblers), and student-athletes who did not gamble on college sports (non-gamblers).

The mean response level of the combined risk taking variable is 11.75 (out of a possible score of 24) for all respondents. The mean response for men's basketball student-athletes was lower ( $M = 11.27$ ,  $SD = 3.98$ ). The mean response for football student-athletes was higher ( $M = 12.25$ ,  $SD = 4.13$ ).

Gamblers ( $M = 13.11$ ,  $SD = 3.96$ ) were significantly more likely to indicate a permissive attitude towards risk-taking behavior than non-gamblers ( $M = 11.30$ ,  $SD = 4.03$ ,  $t(628) = 4.97$ ,  $p < .001$ ), across the entire sample. Gamblers who participated in the sport of football

were significantly more likely to indicate permissive risk taking attitudes ( $M = 13.38$ ,  $SD = 4.24$ ) than non-gamblers ( $M = 11.74$ ,  $SD = 4.00$ ,  $t(307) = 3.26$ ,  $p < .001$ ). This also held true for gamblers in the sport of men's basketball ( $M = 12.73$ ,  $SD = 3.53$ ) in comparison with non-gamblers ( $M = 10.91$ ,  $SD = 4.02$ ,  $t(319) = 3.38$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Table 1 shows that student-athletes who gamble on games other than those in which they play are significantly more likely to have attitudes favorable towards risk taking than their non-gambling counterparts.

The findings regarding student-athletes who gamble on games in which they compete were similar, but somewhat less conclusive than the findings above (see Table 2). For the student athletes who gambled on games in which they competed, they indicated a significant difference in their attitudes towards risk-taking activities ( $M = 14.09$ ,  $SD = 4.79$ ) than the non-gamblers ( $M = 11.67$ ,  $SD = 4.03$ ,  $t(629) = 2.74$ ,  $p < .01$ ) in the sample. In addition, the disparity in mean scores was significant for basketball student-athletes who bet on their own games ( $M = 15.00$ ,  $SD = 6.04$ ) compared to those who did not wager on their contests ( $M = 11.23$ ,  $SD = 3.93$ ,  $t(320) = 2.11$ ,

**Table 1**  
**Mean Attitudes Regarding Risk-Taking for Student-Athletes Who Bet on College Sports**

<i>Sample</i>	<i>Athletes Who Gamble on Other Games</i>	<i>Athletes Who Do Not Gamble on Other Games</i>	<i>t-value</i>	<i>p-value</i>
	n = 161	n = 476		
All	13.11	11.30	4.97	< .001
Men's				
Basketball	12.73	10.91	3.38	< .001
Football	13.38	11.74	3.26	< .001

Scale developed from four variables assessing risk taking attitudes

Scale (4 to 24): 4 = Low personal attitude towards risk taking; 24 = high personal attitude towards risk taking

**Table 2**  
**Mean Attitudes Regarding Risk-Taking for Student-Athletes Who Bet on Their Own Games**

<i>Sample</i>	<i>Athletes Who Gamble on Own Games</i>	<i>Athletes Who Do Not Gamble on Games They Play In</i>	<i>t-value</i>	<i>p-value</i>
	n = 22	n = 609		
All	14.09	11.67	2.74	< .01
Men's				
Basketball	15.00	11.23	2.11	< .05
Football	13.82	12.15	1.63	NS

Scale developed from four variables assessing risk taking attitudes

Scale (4 to 24) 4 = Low personal attitude towards risk taking; 24 = high personal attitude towards risk taking

NS = Not Significant

$p < .05$ ). However, football student-athletes who gambled on their own contests were not significantly different in their attitudes towards risk-taking than their peers who did not bet on their own games. It should be noted that caution in drawing conclusions from the findings regarding those who bet on their own games is warranted since the number of student-athletes who gamble on their own games is very small (approximately 4% of the respondents). However, despite the small sample, the findings are worth noting.

## DISCUSSION

The results of the means testing indicate that men's basketball and football players who gambled on college sports had significantly different attitudes towards risk-taking than their peers who had not participated in gambling activities. In light of the literature surrounding gambling behavior in general, particularly the work of Zuckerman (1969, 1979, 1983), it is not surprising that gamblers indicate more permissive attitudes regarding risk-taking activity. These are especially salient findings due to the sample used. Zuckerman (1983) notes the propensity for sensation seekers to engage in contact sports. It is likely that the sensation seeking that is sought by many of these student-

athletes translates into more permissive attitudes towards risk, and therefore a greater likelihood of gambling activity. This is certainly an area for future study.

It is important to note the higher level of permissiveness towards risk-taking from football players when compared with basketball players. These differences exist between student-athletes who indicate they have gambled on sporting events and those who have not participated in gambling activities. Given the more physical nature of the sport of football, these findings would seem to confirm Zuckerman's premise regarding high sensation seeking individuals.

From a practical standpoint, these findings should be noted by coaches and athletic administrators alike. Student-athletes who exhibit attitudes that indicate willingness to engage in risky behavior, or who participate in actual risky behavior such as misdemeanor illegal activities may be more likely to engage in gambling activity.

Gambling is of particular concern for the student-athlete population for two reasons. First, sports related gambling of any type is a violation of NCAA rules. Second, excessive gambling can effect the student-athlete beyond mere financial consequences. Recent instances of illegal activities such as point shaving and providing inside information on college campuses were the direct result of unpayable gambling debt. Student-athletes in financial trouble from gambling are the prime targets for activities that call into question the integrity of collegiate athletics, which depends on the games being "played straight".

It remains unclear if education regarding the consequences of gambling activity may serve as an effective deterrent to gambling activities. While gambling is likely a focus in many athletic departments' educational efforts, increased emphasis on the associated NCAA penalties for gambling may serve as an effective deterrent in conjunction with education.

### LIMITATIONS

Two limitations of this study were the design of the survey instrument and the generalizability of the findings. The primary limiting factor in this research is that the data set was not specifically designed to assess gambling behaviors among student-athletes. A data set de-

signed to specifically study student-athlete gambling would draw more closely from previous literature regarding student gambling patterns.

In addition, these findings cannot be generalized to all student-athletes since the sample includes only football and men's basketball student-athletes. Furthermore, because of the survey response rate, caution should be exercised in making generalizations to a larger population in order to avoid false characterizations of football and men's basketball student-athletes. Of course additional research in this area would be welcome to confirm or refute this study. It is worth noting the nearly equal representation of basketball and football student-athletes among the respondents and the balanced distribution of student-athletes across four years of enrollment, suggesting the survey responses may be representative of a broader athlete population.

Future research should focus on three areas. First, the rate of student-athlete gambling compared to their non-athlete peers should be established. Second, research should focus on identifying additional factors that may influence gambling among student-athletes. Third, research should focus on participants in sports other than football and basketball as well as female participants.

The findings of this research indicate that student-athletes who gamble are significantly more permissive in their attitudes towards risk-taking than their non-gambling peers. These findings strengthen earlier research by Zuckerman by confirming the relationship between attitudes towards risk-taking and gambling behavior among student athletes. These significant differences should serve as a warning to college and university administrators and coaches that gambling is a problem that needs to be addressed immediately to protect not only the student-athlete from a potentially harmful activity, but to protect the integrity of the sponsoring institutions and the integrity of the games themselves. Failure to advance research in this area could have serious consequences for the future of intercollegiate athletics.

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