

Ill-gotten gain

As backroom betting goes digital, states that make it legal may find the stakes are high

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At Southeastern Louisiana University, the pitcher's mound belonging to Alumni Field lies in the shadow of the press box belonging to Strawberry Stadium. Both arenas, like most of the school, are closed off, cold. The only hint of an approaching spring semester is hurried workers, on all fours, hand-floating concrete in a new section of sidewalk along North General Pershing Street.

As students return to the state's third-largest public university, academic fresh starts won't be the only opportunity coming their way. Lawmakers last summer voted to bring betting to the bayous, and mobile sports betting apps are expected to launch in Louisiana any day. Or at least in time for the Super Bowl.

David Cranford pastors First Baptist Church in nearby Ponchatoula, and he was president of the Louisiana Baptist Convention when that group went up against powerful political operatives backing the gambling legislation. “We live in a state that is itself addicted to gambling,” he said, “and what I mean by that is the state of Louisiana is addicted to gambling revenue, and they will do anything to see gambling expand.”

So will gambling companies like FanDuel and DraftKings. They spent \$1 million trying to get a foothold in Louisiana. They also hired 16 of the state’s top lobbyists to eliminate opposition. They succeeded—mostly—but the rollout has been lengthy because nine parishes opted to keep gambling out. That means online sportsbooks will have to geofence their operations to exclude those areas. The delay didn’t stop Louisiana State University from striking a deal with Caesars Sportsbook, though. Their partnership gives Caesars digital and broadcast sponsorship rights to all major LSU sports, and it represents the first of its kind in the Southeastern Conference.

But Louisiana isn’t alone in its embrace of what has until only recently been illegal, and Southeastern and LSU aren’t the only campuses Vegas intends to invade. Students across the country are using sports betting apps to gamble, and odds are a crisis is brewing.



Customers watch sporting events inside the FanDuel Footprint Center sportsbook in Phoenix. **Matt York/AP**

A RETURN TO GLORY—that’s what sports announcers called Tiger Woods’ 2019 Masters Tournament win. The golf legend hadn’t snagged a major championship in more than a decade and slipping into the green jacket at Augusta National Golf Club for a fifth time seemed unlikely.

Dylan Craig knew all that, but watching Woods shoot 2-under 70 in the opening round made him reconsider the long shot. He decided to put \$100 down and cross his fingers. By the 18th hole, both he and Woods were seeing green.

That 15-fold return remains Craig’s biggest gambling take to date. “Of course, for that one win, there were four or five losses that went with it,” he admits. “But I rarely bet that much money. The most I usually gamble is about \$50 on a game.”

Dorm life at the University of South Carolina introduced Craig to sports betting back when Fantasy Football was the focus. His sports entertainment management major put Craig in daily contact with others who shared his interest, and by the time he went to work as a clubhouse manager for the New York Mets, he was hooked.

“It makes the games a lot more interesting to watch because you feel like you’re a part of something. You’re not just sitting there watching like a spectator,” he says. He describes the excitement of waiting for the outcome as an adrenaline rush. “It’s like riding a roller coaster. You don’t know where the ride will end, but you’re on it.”

At 27, Craig continues to discuss betting opportunities with friends from his undergrad years through a group chat. “A guy will say he’s going to bet \$10 on this game today, and we’ll say cool, we’re going to ride with you. That way we feel like a little community, and I think that’s a huge thing now, the social part of it.”

But it’s the nonsocial aspect of digitized gambling that has addiction counselors worried. No longer are players forced to make public entrances into casinos. Now they can roll the dice with the privacy of a touch screen any time day or night. Apps make betting on sports as convenient as checking Facebook, and gamblers can cash in on more than final scores and point spreads. Proposition wagers, or “props,” are made on action that takes place within a game, such as which quarterback will throw the first interception or how many penalties referees will call in the first quarter.

Under the Professional and Amateur Sports Protection Act, things were different. Gamblers had to travel to Nevada or a few other select states to wager on games. That changed in 2018 when the Supreme Court ruled the law unconstitutional. The justices’ 6-3 decision in *Murphy v. NCAA* freed states to legalize sports gambling, and more than 30 states have jumped on the betting bandwagon. Eighteen of those allow online options.

Craig is enrolled at Liberty University School of Law in Virginia, a state where residents are free to use apps to gamble as much as they like, but he describes himself as the kind of player who can take it or leave it. When football season starts, Craig has a bankroll of about \$500, and if he loses it, he's done. "It's the same kind of thing as walking out of a casino when you're out of cash," he says. "That's how smart people should use the apps."

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But back in Louisiana, problem gamblers make up 7 percent of the population, according to the U.S. Gambling Research Institute. Their personal losses result in broken lives and homes. In 1996, the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute put the social costs of a problem gambler at \$9,469 per year—which would be about \$3 billion per year for Louisiana. That's triple the amount gambling brought Louisiana in revenue last year. LSU economics Professor Emeritus Jim Richardson says at most it was \$915 million.

Will Hall directs the Office of Public Policy for Louisiana's Baptists. He says gambling has become a generational curse in his state, but it didn't have to be this way: "In 1974 Louisiana adopted a constitution that specifically said the legislature is charged with suppressing gambling in our state. By 1991 it didn't matter because they redefined gambling as gaming, and they've been redefining it ever since."

He's right, and they've done it well. Louisiana is the only state with land-based casinos, riverboat casinos, racetrack casinos, tribal casinos, distributed gaming, charitable gaming, lottery, and pari-mutuel wagering.

Last year's push to add sports betting showed Kathleen Benfield of the Louisiana Family Forum that the relationship between state regulators and the gambling industry is too cozy: "Gambling has replaced the oil and gas industry as the No. 1 revenue generator in terms of our state budget. Regulators have become their cheerleaders. They're so addicted to the revenue that it may need to be dealt with at the national level."

Hall also finds it frustrating when members of the Christian community yoke themselves with the gambling industry. Faith-based Pray.com in September announced retired NFL player Drew Brees would provide exclusive content for its platform. A month later the sports icon appeared in the first of three new ads for gambling app PointsBet. In the meantime, Americans wagered \$42 billion on sports as new markets went live. The American Gaming Association says the figure nearly doubled what was spent during the same time period in 2020.



A sports bar patron checks odds on NFL games using a betting app in Hoboken, N.J. **Brian Finke/Redux**

LONG BEFORE BREES became a Saints standout, Travis Turner lived a walk-on's dream as starting quarterback for the University of Nebraska. A torn ACL and a herniated disc added some nightmarish elements to those seasons, but his love of football never wavered, and these days the former Husker is happy to be campus pastor at Arizona Christian University, a school he describes as "very sports focused." Still, he believes apps-based betting could be causing problems for students at ACU—problems that may not be obvious for a while: "Usually guys aren't going to be affected until they have a spouse. Then we're dealing with a whole other issue, and that's my fear. Until there's a consequence for the behavior, they won't see it as a problem."

It's those consequences that business professor and legal policy expert John Warren Kindt in 2018 outlined before members of Congress: "Internet sports gambling places the most addictive form of gambling—real-time gambling—at every school desk, at every work desk, and in every living room—making it easy to 'click your phone, lose your home' or 'click your mouse, lose your house.'"

Pastor Turner has seen the devastation such gambling causes. He and his wife have for decades helped couples strengthen their marriages through mentoring relationships. He's concerned about the coming generation of husbands and fathers:

"Many are already addicted to video games, and adding a glitzy gambling aspect only makes for nitroglycerin. They're luring these kids in. Companies give them the first \$200, and it's no different than a drug dealer giving a first hit." When online sportsbooks debuted in Arizona last September, they handed out more than \$31 million in those "first hit" promotional credits.

As a marriage counselor, Turner believes gambling, with its financial implications, may cause more problems than pornography. He says debt just hammers another dent in a man's ability to lead his family, and the cultural situation is grievous: "With phones you have 10 million prostitutes in your pocket. Now you have 10,000 bookies, too. It's the enemy's way of taking our focus off of who we are, who God made us to be, and it's just evil."

When researchers at the University of California, Los Angeles studied types of gambling by gender, they found the sexes equally attracted to lotteries, but preferential when it came to slot machines (women) and card tables (men). Sports betting stretched the gender gap to an even wider width, with 24 percent of men in the UCLA treatment program having engaged in that form of gambling, compared to only 2 percent of the women.

That's why online gambling ads target young males, linking sports betting to adventure, sex, and success. Industry critics say some apps go even further, using data-profiling software to create personalized potions of sensory feedback and pace of play to encourage compulsive behavior.

When it comes to gambling, the compulsive type can be easy to hide. Friends and family won't notice bloodshot eyes or fidgety legs, but Dakota Henry, chaplain at Baylor University's Beauchamp Addiction Recovery Center, says they can spot something else—shame.

It shows up in slumped shoulders, averted eyes, and silence at the Celebrate Recovery sessions he leads. Groups meet at the center in space that once housed a yogurt shop but now hosts students dealing with all kinds of addictions—pornography, drugs, eating disorders, alcohol, gambling. At the facility’s 2017 dedication, university leaders told reporters its placement in the heart of the campus was intentional. Baylor wasn’t going to pretend addiction doesn’t exist.

But of all the addictions Baylor students confront, gambling may be the most dangerous. It has the highest suicide rate, with 1 in 5 problem gamblers attempting to take their own lives. Lilly Ettinger oversees the center, and she says the path to addiction can begin as early as preschool: “It starts with kids playing Candy Crush and paying 99 cents for loot boxes through microtransactions. It feels like it’s skill-based even though it’s really a game of chance.”

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Ettinger believes that’s why many young adults view sports betting as harmless entertainment or a socially acceptable side hustle. But she says by the time students show up at the center, chances are they’ve lost big. “It could be \$1,000 or 10 times that. We’ve had some who have lost in the six figures. They gamble away hard-earned money that was meant for tuition, or it’s an inheritance intended to help them buy a house one day. The amount isn’t the issue. It’s the new line that’s been crossed. They’re scared. They feel hopeless.”

Ettinger emphasizes theirs isn't a detox program. She refers to staff at the center as "recovery coaches" who teach students spiritual skills like Bible study, prayer, and Sabbath rest.

Henry says they don't spend much time debating whether gambling is a sin. "First and foremost, I say gambling is just not helpful. It actually causes destruction, so let's focus on doing what is good and doing what is helpful."

For recovering gambling addicts, being proactive can mean installing content blocks to prevent the download of sports betting apps on phones and computers. Ettinger says for some, recovery will be a lifelong battle, the kind only won by the grace of God. "But God grants grace quite freely," she smiles. "There's a responsibility to do the things that encourage recovery, but it's no different than how we all pursue a life of righteousness."

Last semester Baylor registered more than 100 students in its addiction recovery programs. Ettinger says it's naïve to think gambling isn't a problem just because some administrators and pastors aren't addressing it. "Addiction is everywhere, and if nobody is coming to you with these issues, it's not because nobody has these issues. It's because they're ashamed, and they assume they're alone."

INSIDE THE BAPTIST Collegiate Ministry at Southeastern, cushy chairs similar to ones at Baylor's Beauchamp Center sit empty, waiting for students with new syllabi. Pastor Cranford and his fellow gambling opponents, Will Hall and Kathleen Benfield, are there on a quiet Tuesday. They're discussing last year's legislative session when the talk turns to next moves.

Maybe regulations to prevent colleges from forming partnerships with the gambling companies ...

And limit them from advertising when children are most likely to be watching and listening ...

They sit around a table where a wall of windows provides a nice view of Strawberry Stadium. Its bleachers are empty now, but come football season, they'll fill with fans, many of them under 21, the legal age to gamble in Louisiana. If the three around the table are right, that won't count for much against the gambling revolution in motion. Instead, students will need to grasp the truth of Proverbs 1:19, that greed for unjust gain takes away the life of its possessors.

"We've had four hurricanes, two major ice storms, two floods, I think five tornadoes," Hall points out, reciting a litany of Louisiana's recent woes. "I believe all that's going to pale in comparison to the disaster coming from sports betting."

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