

Keeping what matters safe

With sports betting on the rise, we need to double down on protecting team culture

BY DAVID CHADWICK

At a “Future of College Sports” conference in early June, NCAA President Charlie Baker expressed that sports betting presents a “major [revenue] opportunity” for the organization. The comments are somewhat surprising given the NCAA’s historical stance on wagering activities.

Since the Supreme Court’s 2018 dismantling of the Professional and Amateur Sports Protection Act (PASPA), the NCAA has been one of the last remaining athletics bodies to not openly partner with sports betting firms. Baker himself acknowledged that an about-face could exacerbate an already growing gambling issue among students and student-athletes—58% of college-aged U.S. adults have participated in at least one sports betting activity, according to NCAA research. If recent patterns from professional leagues like the NFL are any indication, closer college athletics collaboration with sportsbooks could also lead to an uptick in athlete gambling violations.

But in the U.S., where sports betting and legal gambling age limitations are left to individual states—and every league has its own gambling policies—the most pressing issue is no longer how to identify instances of athlete noncompliance. It’s how to preserve sports integrity, and a culture of safety within our teams.



The risks behind the revenue

Without question, the post-PASPA gambling boom has been lucrative. U.S. commercial gaming revenue reached an annual record of \$60.4 billion in 2022, with sports betting accounting for \$7.2 billion, a nearly 73% increase from 2021. Unsurprisingly, many professional teams and leagues wanted in on the deal, with many establishing sponsorships with sportsbooks like DraftKings and FanDuel to bolster their own bottom lines.

“ But beyond the financials, legalized sports betting is changing the culture of sports with players and staff shouldering the burden.

In the NFL, for instance, where all personnel are banned from betting on league events and betting on other sports from league facilities, violations are on the rise. Wide receiver Calvin Ridley was only recently reinstated after a yearlong suspension for gambling on league games. This year alone, multiple players from the Detroit Lions, Indianapolis Colts and Washington

Commanders have been suspended for violating NFL policies.

The landscape is more nuanced at the college-level. The NCAA bans all personnel (student-athletes, coaches, administrators, trainers, etc.) from betting on any sport sponsored by the association at any level (and beyond the NCAA, the legal gambling age in many states is 21). But early 2023 alone saw a string of high profile incidents, including those involving Alabama's baseball coach providing bettors with insider information and student-athletes across Iowa violating NCAA gambling rules.

Headlines like these are a blow to sports integrity, a distraction for teams and a potential warning sign of larger issues to come.

Across all leagues and levels, gambling violations can stoke skepticism among fans and damage public perception of sports. In today's social media age, any athlete can become the target of disgruntled bettors whose money is on the line—creating immense pressure on players that can quickly lead to safety and mental health crises. From Baylor to Pepperdine and

multiple schools in between, student-athletes have dealt with increasing instances of harassment and violent threats from faceless bettors across the U.S.

Preserving fair sport and player wellness demands more than regulations

Where do we go from here?

“ We must recognize that a new world of sports gambling requires a new framework for safeguarding teams, athletes and fans alike.

There are already multiple measures in place to prevent noncompliant athlete gambling and detect violations. The NCAA and many individual professional teams administer ongoing education (increasingly through third-party firms) to reinforce policies and demystify the consequences of illegal wagering. Innovations in monitoring technology, led by private companies like U.S. Integrity, have made it possible to flag abnormal betting activity in a matter of moments. But as recent commentary from industry leaders reveals, there is more work to be done.

Whether it's mounting pressure from fans or the fallout from athlete suspensions, the downstream impacts of gambling touch everyone on a team, posing a threat to morale and engagement. Players and personnel need a more direct, safe outlet to express their own concerns, frustrations or questions, from reporting potential incidents to sharing candid feedback about how gambling culture is impacting their personal wellness.

One-to-many educational and regulatory tactics are two important pillars of what this new framework could look like. However, they must be rounded out with one-to-one venues that allow the individual's voice to be heard.

Money talks, but it's our people we must listen to

Today's sports betting rules and regulations form a complex web, with nuances spun up at the state



government and individual-league level. This reality is out of any particular team or school's control.

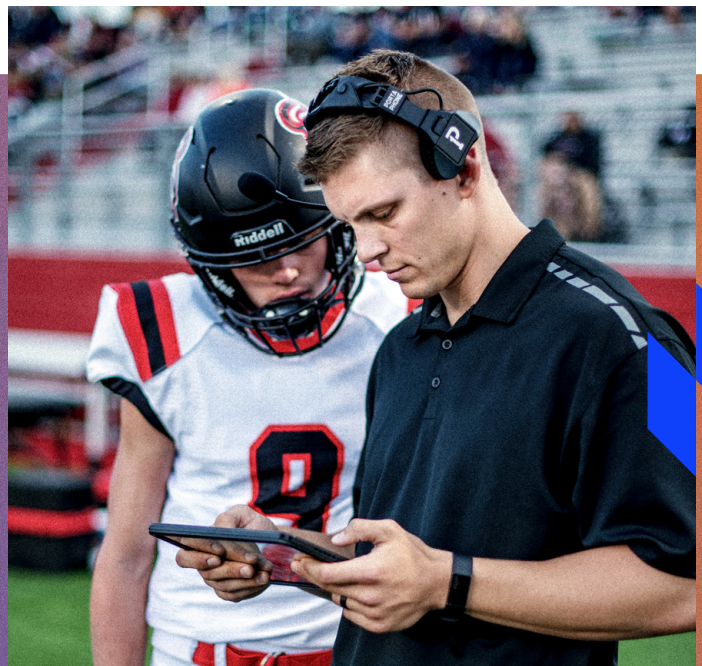
Moving forward, league leadership, athletics directors and coaches need to focus on what they can control: supporting their people.

Fair competition and team camaraderie depend on trust—the element that our growing betting culture threatens to erode.

“To truly maintain the soul of sports, we need to invest more in the individuals who bring it to life.

That's why we recently partnered with U.S. Integrity to launch Athlete Alert Powered by RealResponse, an anonymous tipline for reporting gambling-related harm and sharing critical information about gambling-related corruption. Resources like this acknowledge the direct and indirect effects sports betting can have on athletes and team staff, but also empower them to play a role in protecting each other's well-being and the purity of their competition.

The problematic effects of sports betting that flourished in a post-PASPA world won't be mitigated overnight. But with the right tools, we can better defend athletes so that they can focus on—and simply enjoy—the game.



REALRESPONSE®

RealResponse is invested in elevating voices in the sports betting conversation. By offering a safe, anonymous platform for two-way communication, we ensure everyone has a chance to be heard.

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