

Editorial

‘Legitimate’ gambling is destroying sports

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If tennis is to be cured of the ruinous cancer of match-rigging, the temptation to cheat must be surgically removed

Tennis has become the latest sport rocked by a match-fixing scandal, though it comes as no surprise given the increase in major tournaments, online gambling platforms and subjects deemed worthy of a wager. Underground gambling is deservedly criticised, but in fact legitimate bookies play an equal if not greater role in corrupting popular sports.

It's easy to find legal gambling websites that offer odds on whether a given football match will feature a penalty or a red card or "above or below" three yellow cards. It's fun for the punters, but it leaves referees and players open to the temptation of fixing matches for financial benefit.

In snooker and other such sports, the betting focuses on the margin of victory - the number of frames separating the winner and loser. There's nothing to stop the rivals across the table from making a secret deal in advance and prearranging the outcome. It's the same in tennis - bets are placed on the margin in games or sets by which the winner triumphs.

With the Australian Open underway in Melbourne this week, rumours of cheating that have swirled around tennis for years took on an aura of authenticity that will park a shadow of doubt over centre court for the duration. The sport's guiding authorities have been hit by claims that they covered up or ignored evidence revealed in a joint investigation by the BBC and BuzzFeed, an online news portal.

The investigators allege that 16 top professionals, including the winners of Grand Slams, as the four biggest tournaments in tennis are known, "have repeatedly been reported for losing games when highly suspicious bets have been placed against them". In addition, a top-50 player in the Australian Open is "suspected of repeatedly fixing his first set".

The sport's authorities insist only a minority of pro players is involved. They are just not looking at the big picture.

No names have emerged, but the damage done by the allegations is fundamental and far-reaching. Fans will henceforth have to decide whether to somewhat naively suspend suspicion

every time they watch a match or accept that rigging might be occurring behind the scenes. For astute observers, lingering doubt cannot help but undermine the spontaneous enjoyment of each point.

Match-fixing scandals tainted Italian football's top league in 2006 and international cricket in 2010. Italian football has seen big-name clubs put to the sword for skewing matches. Whereas no top-tier tennis player has ever been found guilty of taking a cheater's dive on court, CNN reports that the Tennis Integrity Unit has delivered 18 "convictions" and six lifetime bans to lower-level professionals since its formation in 2008.

Tennis authorities also have in place a system monitoring "suspicious" betting patterns. Large and successful wagers on unlikely outcomes are the natural targets. Smart cheats, of course, provide no such concrete evidence, leaving investigators bouncing their probes off the practice wall.

The larger focus for authorities of a grander scale should be the legitimate bookmakers offering odds on any imaginable outcome, no matter how surprising it would be if it came to pass. They do so without regard for the fact that they might open the door to corruption for match officials and players.

Integrity in sports is an exaggerated value and the sophistication of modern-day gambling is under-appreciated. Punters no longer bet on who will win or lose but on the likelihood of a single yellow card being produced on the football pitch, or one "error-strewn" frame of snooker, or a surging tennis player suddenly dropping a game. Such whimsies can make or break fortunes.

Tennis joins other sports in facing potential ruin. The only way to head it off is a serious review of betting regulations. Simply punishing the wayward players or referees won't uproot the problem. The authorities must realise that absolute freedom for bookmakers corrupts absolutely.