



## The Lure of Sports Gambling to Young Men

In April 2026, Texas Tech quarterback Brendan Sorsby announced that he was taking an indefinite leave of absence from school to enter a residential treatment program for his gambling addiction.<sup>1</sup> This was shocking news. A prized transfer, he had left the University of Cincinnati to return to his home state and collect a reported \$5 million under his Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) contract. Now, whether he can play college football anywhere and the survival of his professional future (he was a potential first-round draft pick in 2027) are unknown.

Lawyers and judges will sort out what happens to Sorsby. His story, which made the news as well as the sports pages, highlights the corrupting influences of modern legal sports gambling. Its dangerously addictive quality has seduced young men, a target audience, and increasingly young women as well. It has corrupted sports. State governments are ensnared by the gambling tax revenues they collect.

The losers in this industry are clear—the gamblers, including young men like Sorsby.

### How Modern Gambling Works

Playing games of chance seems almost hardwired into humans. Evidence of the earliest known gambling tools—dice—comes from a recent find in the Americas that dates back to at least 12,000 years ago.<sup>2</sup>

The urge is there, but so are the warnings. Gambling is universally condemned or at least discouraged by every religious tradition. Catholics are among the more lenient faith groups. The Catechism of the Catholic Church cautions against excessive gambling that enslaves an individual, but allows that gambling per se is “not

contrary to justice.”<sup>3</sup> Overall, researchers have found that religious belief and practice restrain gambling.<sup>4</sup>

It is perhaps the only force that does. Through the 19<sup>th</sup> and most of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, gambling in the U.S. was a mostly underground and morally suspect pastime identified with the decadent rich and imprudent poor. Restrictions loosened, beginning with Nevada in the 1930s, and followed elsewhere in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by tribal casinos, riverboat gaming, and off-site horserace gambling. Sports betting remained off limits through a federal law passed in 1992. Unlike card and table games and horseracing, sports betting outside of Las Vegas was handled by neighborhood bookies.

The turning point that made sports gambling a multibillion-dollar industry was the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision in *Murphy v. National Collegiate Athletic Association* (2018). The Court determined that the federal restrictions on sports gambling violated the Tenth Amendment to the Constitution. Eyeing a potentially significant source of new revenue, most states approved online and casino sports betting. Currently only eleven states prohibit it.<sup>5</sup>

The online sportsbooks reported \$16.96 billion in revenue (gross income after payouts to winners) in 2025. This was an increase of 22.8 percent over 2024.<sup>6</sup> The “handle,” or the total amount wagered, was an eye-watering \$166.94 billion, up 11 percent from 2024. The industry has reached these amounts without the participation of California and Texas, which currently prohibit the sportsbooks.<sup>7</sup>

The runaway popularity of online sports betting owes much to the ease of getting started and the sportsbooks’ success in keeping users engaged. The dominant companies, FanDuel and DraftKings, piggybacked on

their existing fantasy sports audiences and platforms. Fantasy games, which involve players acting as general managers who pick their “teams” from athletes across the sport, became enormously popular in the 2000s. While “leagues” made up of friends, family and co-workers once ruled and still exist, platforms like FanDuel allowed players to compete against people from anywhere with new “teams” constructed at any point in the season.

FanDuel and DraftKings added sports betting to their daily fantasy league offerings. They have competition, but remain the dominant firms, with 44 percent and 34 percent of the market respectively. BetMGM is a distant third.<sup>8</sup>

To sign on new gamblers, the sportsbooks dangle what sound like risk-free incentives. For example, if someone places a \$50 bet and loses, he or she might get a \$50 bonus bet that would need to be spent within a week or be forfeited.<sup>9</sup> Those signup incentives are part of massive advertising budgets. FanDuel and DraftKings each spend around \$1.2 to \$1.3 billion annually in advertising and promotion.

While the focus of the largest operators has shifted away from promotions to acquire new customers, they spend heavily on television and digital ads—roughly \$666 million annually.<sup>10</sup> Promotion also includes campaigns to bring the remaining non-betting states into the fold, and offers of VIP benefits to the best—that is, most profitable—customers.

### So Easy to Get Hooked

Online sportsbooks furnish the old-fashioned sorts of bets that people used to make in Vegas or with their local bookie—straight wins and losses, wins and losses against the proposed point spread, and scores falling over or under an offered number. They also have more exciting products that take advantage of the ability to bet on live action. One can wager on pretty much anything: outcomes in the midst of games as the odds change, or “prop bets” on the performance of individual athletes, on points scored in a quarter of a football game, on shots and scores of golfers as they step up to the tee, on the minutiae of a tennis match.

Exotic parlays—gambling that a long-shot sequence of outcomes will happen—in single games or multiple ones

attract bettors on losing streaks. A bettor can wager that a double play, a triple by a specific player, and a pitcher tossing six strikeouts in a single baseball game, for example, will turn everything around. Parlays are the most profitable wagers for the sportsbooks.

Fast action, and the constant parade of incentives and micro-bets, create highs and lows that suggest an analogy to drugs. “Just as new, cheap, high-potency synthetic opioids like fentanyl have created conditions for faster progression from initiation to disordered opioid use,” observes a National Institute on Drug Abuse article, “gambling on high-speed, 24/7 mobile platforms exposes vulnerable people to a potent combination of continuous betting opportunities, data-driven promotions, and real-time micro-rewards.”<sup>11</sup>

### Who is Wagering?

According to a survey conducted in 2025 by the Siena College Research Institute and St. Bonaventure University’s Jandoli School of Communication, *22 percent of Americans have an account with an online sports betting site.* In the youngest cohort in their sample, 18- to 34-year-olds, the percentage climbs to 35 percent. Sixty-six percent of that group also reports having more than one betting app, which can sometimes offer different odds on specific wagers.

Online betting account holders are engaged: half of the men and 54 percent of all of the younger cohort check their accounts at least twice a day. Only those who described themselves as avid sports fans reported winning more often than losing; wagers between \$50 and \$200 are the sweet spot for most respondents.

While the vast majority of the surveyed bettors said they gamble for fun, to make watching games more interesting, and possibly to win, there were indications of trouble. Nine percent of the total betting population and 12 percent of the younger cohort have called a gambling help line. Twenty percent report losing enough to have problems meeting financial obligations, with the younger group and Latinos (23 and 27 percent) leading the way. If the younger respondents were not in trouble themselves, 26 percent said they knew someone who was, versus 16 percent of the total population.<sup>12</sup>

The general pattern in this survey holds in others, such as one conducted by Pew Research: young (18-29) men,

Latinos and blacks are most likely to gamble and to get into trouble doing it.<sup>13</sup> Men in all age groups are more prone to put money on games, which makes sense since they are the core sports fans.

Women are catching up. The Pew survey shows that *25 percent of men place wagers, compared to 19 percent of women*. While the research has not focused on women, developments such as Taylor Swift's appearances at her fiancé's Kansas City Chiefs games, the rise of betting on women's college and pro sports, and targeted advertising appear to be involved in the rising percentage of women sports gamblers.<sup>14</sup>

### Sad Stories Mount

**S**till, problem gambling among young men has captured media attention for good reason. The most powerful stories are testimonials about how a habit of playing video games, sometimes developed as early as a boy's pre-teen years, morphed from a fun pastime with friends to a life taken over by obsession and lies.

One testimonial described a college friend who stole from a family member's account in a desperate and fruitless attempt to gamble his way out of losses.<sup>15</sup> Another described problem gambling even among teens who figure out ways around the age restrictions. The sportsbooks suck them via seductive celebrity advertising on a par with cigarette ads of an earlier era; peer encouragement; and existing smartphone addictions.<sup>16</sup>

Recent graduates getting on their feet with their first jobs are especially attractive to the sportsbooks, since they have larger paychecks to gamble and lose. The anecdotes are everywhere. One 26-year-old started gambling when it became legal in his state, as it combined his love of sports and an itch to make money. Gambling became his obsession, causing him to bet on tennis matches and, when nothing else was available in the middle of the night, British darts. He lost his job and had to move back in with his parents.<sup>17</sup>

A fifth-grade teacher began gambling during the Covid lockdowns to pass the time between Zoom classes. Small wagers on his favorite team grew into putting down \$5,000 on parlays. DraftKings encouraged him through bonuses and free game tickets—a common gaming practice throughout the industry to keep good customers in the fold. As the stress of nearly wrecking his family's

finances and living a lie became too much, he came clean and got help.<sup>18</sup>

Gambling addiction is not new. Whether betting illegally through a bookie or legally through casino games, about 1 to 2 percent of the population experience addiction. Today, with people effectively carrying casinos in their pockets, the prevalence of gambling problems has probably grown.<sup>19</sup> This is especially true in the “gray zone” of “hazardous” gambling, in which people show some signs, such as chasing losses, but have not developed a clear addiction.<sup>20</sup>

Young people are the most susceptible to the lures of sportsbook phone apps. As social media natives, they expect the instant gratification and feedback that Silicon Valley knows how to provide. Constant advertising portrays gambling as synonymous with both winning and fun. Young-adult gamblers may not be rich, but many have disposable income.

Many college-age people have not learned how to tame the addictive quality of their social media feeds. They struggle to get past the rush of winning—or almost winning—and the urge to regain the high. At an age when risky behavior is common and impulse control is low, they are vulnerable targets.<sup>21</sup>

Some college students, men especially, drift into addiction, along with missing classes, drinking, and withdrawing from friends. Most, we should remember, engage in only occasional bets that do not grow into obsession.

### Who Wins?

**O**nline sportsbooks are a multibillion-dollar industry. Some of the winners and losers in all of this activity are unexpected.

Most bettors, of course, lose. On average, a Stanford University study found, they lose 7.5 cents for every dollar they put down. A bettor might get on a lucky streak, but only 3 to 5 percent win over time. Sportsbooks notice those who figure out an angle to score wins, and use them to set odds and eventually ban them or cap the amount they can bet.<sup>22</sup> Both large and small losers risk not only their bets, but their habits spiraling out of control.

We would expect that the sportsbooks are profiting, given their large revenues. Yet, theirs is a low-margin business

with high operating costs that include the computing bandwidth required for the instantaneous response users expect, promotions and advertising, and taxes. Even a firm with a built-in audience like ESPN failed in this business, and the two major sportsbooks did not show profits until 2025.

Sportsbooks are now facing competition from the prediction markets, which offer the chance to take positions on sports along with pretty much everything else.<sup>23</sup>

State governments are clear winners, at least in the tax revenue windfall they have reaped. In 2025, states reportedly collected a record \$3.68 billion.<sup>24</sup> State taxes vary widely, from 6.75 percent in Nevada and Iowa to 51 percent in New York, New Hampshire and Rhode Island. With the highest tax and the largest revenue from sports betting in the nation, New York took in \$1.32 billion in 2025, just under 1 percent of the state budget.<sup>25</sup>

Sports teams, leagues, and sports themselves have both won and lost. Interest driven by gambling no doubt has contributed to improved ratings for almost all televised games, even formerly niche sports. Teams and leagues also count on “preferred sportsbook” deals to pad their revenues.

Yet gambling scandals have rocked sports at all levels, from low-level college teams to professional basketball and baseball. Fans now have to wonder whether their normally reliable relief pitcher who can suddenly no longer throw strikes is in fact part of a gambling deal. Other angry fans text death threats to players they blame for a losing bet.<sup>26</sup>

Brendan Sorsby is just the tip of the iceberg of gambling that has corrupted young men, sports, and fans.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.foxsports.com/stories/college-football/texas-tech-qb-brendan-sorsby-gambling-addiction>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2026/04/260402042731.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.usccb.org/sites/default/files/flipbooks/catechism/582/>.

<sup>4</sup> <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/28126099/>.

<sup>5</sup> <https://athlonsports.com/betting/legal-status-of-sports-betting-by-state>.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.sportsbettingdime.com/news/betting/u-s-sports-betting-revenues-rise-to-nearly-17-billion-in-2025/>.

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.espn.com/espn/betting/story/\\_/id/48045855/sports-betting-hits-record-1696-billion-revenue-2025](https://www.espn.com/espn/betting/story/_/id/48045855/sports-betting-hits-record-1696-billion-revenue-2025). The term “sportsbook” refers to online platforms that facilitate betting on sports.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.sportbotai.com/stats/sportsbook-market-share>.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.sportsbookreview.com/bonuses/>.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.scaleo.io/blog/how-much-sportsbooks-spend-on-marketing-updated-stats/>.

<sup>11</sup> <https://nida.nih.gov/about-nida/noras-blog/2025/11/gambling-disorder-in-the-age-of-mobile-sports-betting>.

<sup>12</sup> <https://sri.siena.edu/american-sports-fanship-survey-2025/>. This discussion relies on the crosstabs.

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2025/10/02/americans-increasingly-see-legal-sports-betting-as-a-bad-thing-for-society-and-sports/>.

<sup>14</sup> <https://kindbridge.com/gambling/women-gambling-addiction/>.

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.wsj.com/lifestyle/sports-betting-gen-z-college-908fbada?mod=Searchresults&pos=8&page=1>.

<sup>16</sup> [https://www.thefp.com/p/boys-like-me-need-protection-from?utm\\_source=publication-search](https://www.thefp.com/p/boys-like-me-need-protection-from?utm_source=publication-search).

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.nationalreview.com/2026/03/states-went-all-in-on-sports-gambling-and-young-men-are-the-losers/>.

<sup>18</sup> Daniel Funt, *Everybody Loses: The Tumultuous Rise of American Sports Gambling* (New York: Gallery Books, 2026), p. 241-244.

<sup>19</sup> [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpub/article/PIIS2468-2667\(24\)00126-9/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpub/article/PIIS2468-2667(24)00126-9/fulltext).

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.statnews.com/2025/11/11/sports-betting-apps-public-health-crisis/>.

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.addictioncenter.com/news/2024/01/gambling-addiction-college-students/>.

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.wsj.com/finance/investing/sports-betting-study-5d9a0044>;

<https://www.boydsbets.com/percentage-profitable-sports-bettors/>; Funt, *Everybody Loses*, *supra*, chapter 4.

<sup>23</sup> <https://frontofficesports.com/draftkings-turns-first-full-year-profit-stock-up-47-2025/>;

<https://finance.yahoo.com/markets/stocks/articles/fanduel-revenue-grows-6-sports-222000439.html>; Funt, *Everybody Loses*, *supra*, chapter 11.

<sup>24</sup> <https://sportshandle.com/us-sports-betting-in-2025-reaches-record-highs-driven-by-new-york-and-illinois/>.

<sup>25</sup> <https://sports.yahoo.com/articles/york-sees-26-3b-sports-170100115.html>.

<sup>26</sup> [https://www.thefp.com/p/what-gambling-has-done-to-sports-and-to-us?utm\\_source=publication-search](https://www.thefp.com/p/what-gambling-has-done-to-sports-and-to-us?utm_source=publication-search).

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