

# Is sports betting *all bad*?

By Dr. J

This is a guest editorial as I have been invited to be the temporary editor of *Sport Health* for one issue. I may end up doing the job for a bit longer still, although who knows whether I will decide my workload is too great or alternatively the 7356 SMA members I have previously offended heavily with Dr. J. columns will successfully object to my editorship.

(Note to Gary Moorhead at this stage: I realise that SMA doesn't have that many members and I'm sure you wish they did. I'm just using the same accounting methods that the AFL and NRL do when they say "6 million people attended our games last year". That is, if I offended one member six times I have counted that as 6 members.)

I want to discuss sports betting in this editorial, as it is a topic of interest to most people working in sports medicine. Many, many years ago I used to run the computer program that provided The Age computer football tips in Melbourne. I don't think it was legal to bet on the football then, but plenty of people did effectively bet small amounts in office tipping competitions and some of them even let the computer tips influence them.

I don't bet on the football currently because I obey a very good rule that the football

competitions currently have that you can't have a bet if you work for one of teams, which counts me out for the NRL at least. This is a good rule in that it obviously formally outlaws someone from being party to a team throwing a match. Unless you are devotees of whichever religion Hansie Cronje belonged to, you have to support laws that will prevent match-fixing.

Some people think that it should be OK for players or staff members of a team to back themselves to win, but I think this should also be illegal, as strictly speaking it is insider trading. If you happen to know that all of your gun players are fit and healthy and highly motivated and you back them to win on Saturday, there isn't much difference between this and buying shares in a company about which you have privileged good-news inside information just before the news gets released to the market.

If you say that it is OK to back your team to win, is it just as fair to back one of the listed interchange players to be first try-scorer at long odds because you happen to know that he is actually starting the game on the wing? I suppose there needs to be a small exception to the rules for office tipping competitions, which are strictly gambling, but where the nominal amount

**I obey a very good rule that the football competitions currently have that you can't have a bet if you work for one of teams.**

wagered on each individual game is minuscule.

I thought of this topic recently when Leigh Matthews and Wayne Jackson both condemned football betting after the Brisbane Lions lost a Wizard Cup game to Geelong, and with it a whole lot of bookmakers' Bugs Bunny.

Apparently the punters saw Geelong posted at good odds and heard that Brisbane would be resting 10 injured players, making Geelong a good bet. The logic turned out to be sound. No one suspected that there was any fixing of the result and the bookmakers admitted that they simply got the price wrong in the first place. The authorities who dislike sports betting may feel uncomfortable about it because in games like this some people (Indian cricket fans perhaps) may have thought the game was fixed.

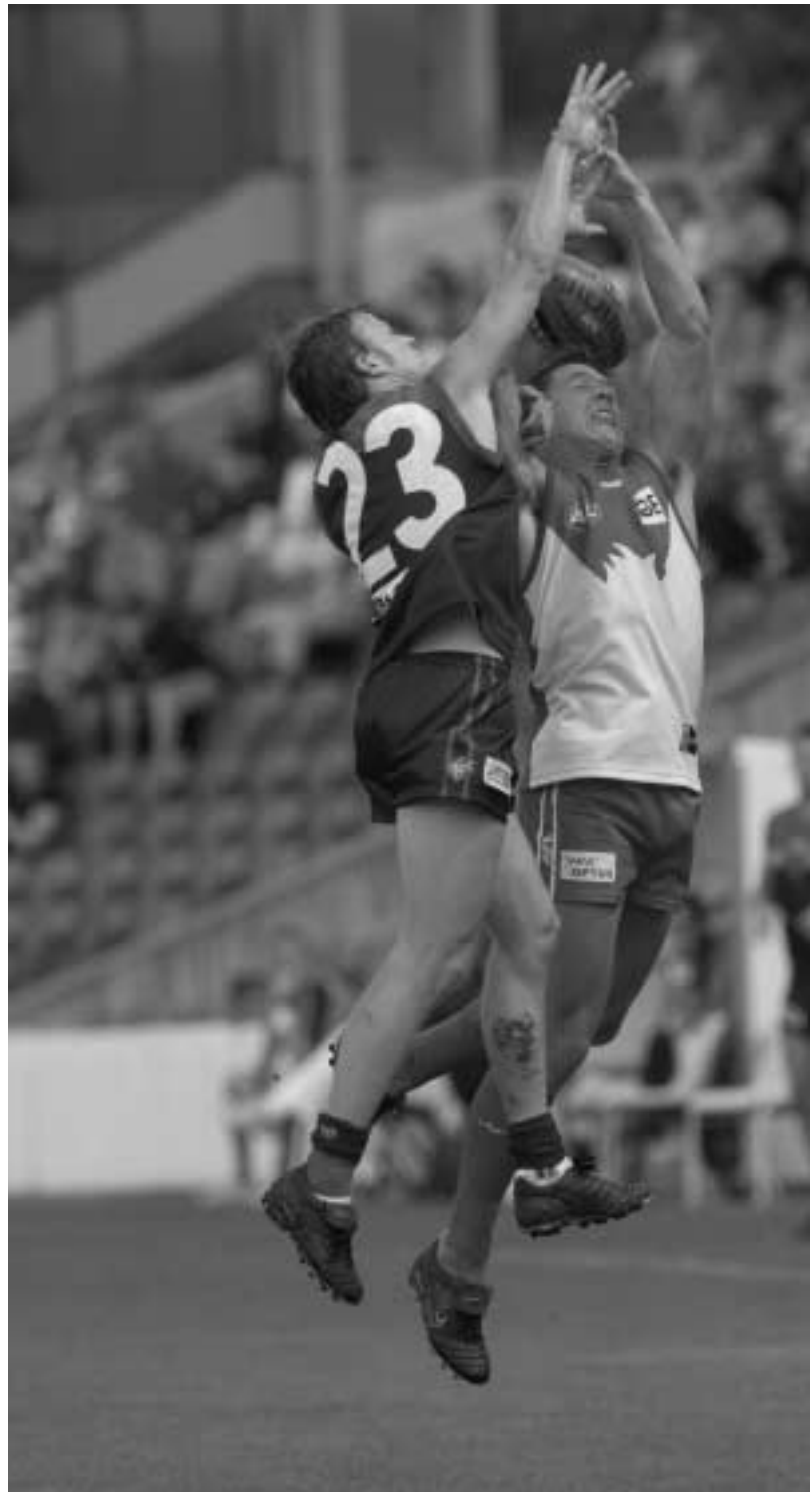
There are a few important cautions about sports betting. Those of us working for teams should always take the rules prohibiting us from betting seriously. Perhaps the relevant authorities should think about rules forbidding bets on 'friendly' or 'dead rubber' games. There

**One day cricket has far too many meaningless matches that became the breeding ground for player corruption.**

are plenty of 'live' football games (where the result matters to both teams) to bet on, but it is the occasional match where the result is meaningless in which it is potentially easier to corrupt the participants.

One day cricket has far too many meaningless matches that became the breeding ground for player corruption. There is obviously a certain type of player who wants to win all the important matches, but who can be bought to go easy in an unimportant one. Exotic bets also need to be treated with care by the authorities, particularly in meaningless matches. Perhaps there are some players who wouldn't ever throw a match, but who might be prepared to feed the ball out to the right wing to make sure the right winger was first try-scorer in a meaningless match.

**If you say that it is OK to back your team to win, is it just as fair to back one of the listed interchange players to be first try-scorer at long odds because you happen to know that he is actually starting the game on the wing?**



Despite all of these problems, I think there is one major positive about sports betting that rarely rates a mention. For problem gamblers, of which we have many in Australia, sports betting is a relatively benign way to gamble. As Dr. Evil would have phrased it,

“sports betting is the Diet Coke of gambling”. It is a slow ride. It is not a one-arm bandit that gives you a result within 2 seconds and begs you to put more money straight in. If you sit down in front of Foxtel on Saturday night and decide you are going to bet

\$50 on the football that night, you put your fifty on and watch the matches and if you do badly you kick the television set at the end of the night. You don't watch 5 minutes of the first game and, while it is still in progress, race down to the ATM to get another \$300 out to put on another 6 matches, which is what you might do if you were having a night on the pokies or you were at Crown Casino.

Just as we sometimes have to admit that many of us have a small liking for gratuitous violence, and we can satisfy this by watching replays of some footballer's leg snap in half on TV, many of us have to admit that the thrill of gambling is sometimes an itch that needs scratching. It is far better to be gambling in a form that encourages planned and limited betting than one which encourages non-stop turnover until your wallet is empty. If you subscribe to the Alcoholics Anonymous view of addiction, you aren't allowed to have any drinks at all. If you believe that alcohol is good in moderation, then the best way to handle a liking for alcohol is to develop a taste for expensive red wine, and you can enjoy this in small amounts without ever being able to afford to become an alcoholic.

Although a football administrator from time to time may facetiously say that it would be better if football betting did not exist at all, realists know that one of the reasons why football enjoys its popularity is because of gambling.

Doctors, physiotherapists and the like have assumed far more

importance in football teams over the last few years, and one of the main reasons why clubs take injuries more seriously has been because of the increased media attention given to injuries. The media outlets are reporting more injury information because of extra demand, and part of this demand is coming from the gambling side of the market.

I need to declare an interest in the media reporting of injuries as I am involved in a website ([www.injuryupdate.com.au](http://www.injuryupdate.com.au)) which is aiming to provide further information on the types of injuries suffered by professional footballers. Hopefully this sort of website will meet a public demand. Some of the demand will arise from compassion or curiosity about injuries, but some of it may also arise from punters trying to work out which teams are more likely to win matches.

Since Australians tend to gamble excessively, but over 80% of this is via poker machines and casinos, there is plenty of potential for sports betting to attempt to grow out of the existing gambling market, rather than be encouraging more gambling overall. If sports betting increases over the next 10 years, but there is a corresponding greater decrease in poker machine betting, then whoever is responsible for keeping gambling under control (who is that by the way?) should be satisfied with the progress.

Although there are obvious potential negatives associated with sports betting, I don't think it is all bad. There are a lot of bigger problems in Australia, like the proliferation of 4-wheel drives

**For problem gamblers, of which we have many in Australia, sports betting is a relatively benign way to gamble.**

**We sometimes have to admit that many of us have a small liking for gratuitous violence, and we can satisfy this by watching replays of some footballer's leg snap in half on TV.**

on city streets. The road toll should be a bigger issue than gambling, but no government bodies want to make hard decisions regarding the individual right to by as huge a vehicle as one desires. Just like the gun situation in America, where almost everyone wants to own a gun because they have to protect themselves from other citizens who virtually all have guns, I dread the day in Australia where we will all feel compelled to buy 4-wheel drives because everyone else has one and potentially will crush you in an accident if you don't own one as well. What will the road toll of 10 years time be like if the average car size and weight has increased by 50%?

You don't have to have a PhD to work out which direction it will head in.

**There are a lot of bigger problems in Australia, like the proliferation of 4-wheel drives on city streets.**