

College Basketball's Incurable Habit: The 1978-79 Point Shaving Scandal at Boston College

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This paper and presentation examined the 1978-79 Boston College Point Shaving Scandal to illustrate that its occurrence was probable and predictable based on three significant factors: 1) the numerous gambling scandals and gambling incidents which had infiltrated gambling basketball since the early 1930's, 2) the symbiotic relationship which exists between college basketball and gambling-a relationship made stronger each year as the stakes in the game reach unparalleled heights, and 3) the growing influence and involvement of organized crime in college basketball fixing scandals.

By today's standards the Boston College Scandal was hardly unique. There had been one in 1945 when five Brooklyn College players admitted they were planning to fix an upcoming game with Akron University on January 31, 1945. In January, 1949 four gamblers were arrested for attempting to bribe David Shapiro, a co-captain at George Washington University. Two years later Hank Poppe and John Byrnes, Manhattan College co-captains during the 1948-49 season, were arrested for attempting to bribe Manhattan player Junius Kellogg.

Soon after the arrests of Poppe and Byrnes, the massive 1951 scandal broke and from February, 1951 until the end of October of that same year 35 players and ex-players from CCNY, LIU, Toledo, Bradley, NYU, and Kentucky admitted to "fixing" games dating back to 1947. In addition, 16 players reported they had spurned bribe offers to "fix" games. This scandal reflected the ugliest wart of a disease which had gone unchecked for years. The 1961 scandal was more than twice the size of the 1951 scandal and the final tally revealed at least 50 players from 27 colleges had fixed games in 51 cities in 22 states.

The principals involved in planning the Boston College scandal were Henry Hill and James Burke, two individuals with organized crime connections believed to have played a key role in planning and executing the December, 1978 5.85 Lufthansa theft at Kennedy Airport. Assisting Hill and Burke were Paul Mazzei and Anthony and Rocco Perla, two brothers who initially cultivated Boston College back-up center Rick Kuhn to fix games during the 1978-79 season. All of the above individuals except Hill were indicted and convicted on charges of racketeering, bribery, and crossing state lines to commit a crime. Hill was not charged as he was an informant in the trial. Starting guard Jim Sweeney, another implicated player, was also not indicted apparently in exchange for his testimony against the others nor was starting center Joe Beaulieu also accused of being involved in the fixing scheme. Following the trial, leading scorer Ernie Cobb was indicted and tried in a separate trial for his role in the scandal. Cobb, who later admitted accepting money from one of the Perla brothers "to play as hard as he could," was acquitted.

The significance of the Boston College scandal is that it demonstrates that the fixing of college basketball games has never been far from the surface since its first reported incidence in 1931. And, unlike recruiting or academic abuses, which can be readily addressed by NCAA or institutional regulations, the gambling problem is made even more complicated by the involvement of organized crime. It is hard to imagine how college basketball gambling scandals can be prevented in the future when the American justice system has been unable to stop organized crime activity in prostitution, drug trafficking, and other types of illegal gambling.