

# SPORT AND GAMBLING

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## **Ned Irish and the Rise of Gambling in College Basketball: Filling in Open Dates for the Betting Gentry**

Repeated gambling scandals in college basketball have demonstrated that gambling's legal and illegal structural aspects continually plague the sport. When scandals have occurred at Arizona State and Northwestern, or rumored at North Carolina State, Michigan, Fresno State, and the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, it's not surprising that the public hardly bats an eye. Despite the myth that sports gamblers make substantial money by betting sporting events, individuals who profit by betting on sports are few in number. Even the most successful professional sports gamblers will agree that they seldom win 60 percent of their sport wagers over a few seasons. Since any standard bet with a legal or illegal bookmaker requires the wagering of \$11 to win \$10, the bettor must win 52.38 percent on all monies bet simply to break even. Sports gamblers clearly understand that those who generate profits from sports betting are the ones on the favorable side of the eleven-to-ten; the ones setting odds and booking bets. Perhaps it's this fundamental precept involving the unlikelihood of winning by betting on sporting events that has spawned since the 1920's, a practice which has regularly surfaced in college basketball – professional gamblers wanting to ensure the success of their bets have often conspired with college players to manipulate games in their favor.

Despite gambling's simultaneous rise with sports during the early part of the twentieth century, sports historians have for the most part recounted specific gambling scandals as if they were isolated occurrences. Writers such as Cohen, Rosen, Davies and Abram, Porter, and Figone have provided a snapshot of this nefarious activity in college basketball, but for the most part neglected to address the historical evolution and nexus between illegal gambling and college basketball. That sport and social historians would neglect to investigate the complex beginnings of gambling and sports is intriguing since today gambling is the

biggest single industry in the country, in terms of both revenues generated and the number of customers/participants.

This presentation examined extant social and economic factors during the 1920's and 1930's, which explain in part the infiltration of illegal gambling into college basketball. Such an analysis revealed that by the mid-1930's, the playing of games in civic arenas, the creation of national tournaments, and the game's popularity were related to the rise of illegal gambling in the sport, which was ignored, not understood, and remained unchecked by college and law enforcement officials until the early 1950's.

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**The Chicago Bookie Bill of 1935**

This project examines a unique political moment in sport history, when Chicago tried to legalize off-track bookmaking. Chicago was one of the major centers of gambling during the Depression, where it greased the wheels of local politics. There were perhaps 7,500 gambling places in the city. The most popular betting systems were the policy wheel and bookmaking on the races. On May 28, 1935, Mayor Ed Kelly announced that his administration was backing legislation to permit the licensing of handbooks to raise needed revenue and to stop wasting the police's time harassing bookmakers. This had never been attempted in the United States. A bill was introduced in the state House of Representatives to permit handbooks in all cities. Kelly expected it would provide large revenue for the city, "permit efficient control of handbooks, and provide relief for taxpayers." There were reportedly some 1,500 handbooks in Chicago. The first bill sent to the state legislature was badly defeated, but then a revised bill that applied only to Chicago was approved by the state legislature. It was estimated that if the license fee was set at \$2,500 for each book, the city would make from \$3.75 million to \$6.25 million.

Yet, despite the support of the Kelly-Nash Democratic machine, Democratic Governor Henry Homer, a former judge vetoed the bill, even though Attorney General Kerner ruled it might be legal. Homer found the proposal revolutionary and refused to approve it. Kelly retaliated, and decided to drop Homer. Another Democrat was slated for the next election, but Homer won