

BEATING THE GAMBLING BUG



WHEN THE OCCASIONAL FRIENDLY WAGER ON THE GOLF COURSE OR THE CLUBHOUSE POKER GAME TRANSFORMS INTO AN OBSESSION WITH BETTING, YOU'VE GOT AN ADDICTION. HERE'S HOW TO RECOGNIZE THAT YOU MAY NEED HELP.

By Eric Butterman

In sports, we applaud gamblers — the athletes who take risks on the field, the managers and coaches who don't go "by the book," the general managers who take chances on players nobody else wants. But when an athlete or anyone associated with a sport gambles with money — and at the expense of the game — they could have an addiction problem and not even know it. According to gambling addiction counselor Robert Perkinson, author of *The Gambling Addiction Patient Workbook*, an addict is loosely defined as someone who is trying to stop something they can't control and won't get help for it.

"They try to quit the habit but the compulsion is just too great," Perkinson says. "They know it's harming them to continue. Gambling is an unusual addiction because one more use could solve all of your problems. If you win the Powerball lottery, you'll get out of your debt. But the reality is, if you continue to gamble the odds are 100 percent that you'll lose every penny you have. Gamblers don't know that. They think the odds are in their favor because they are 'smart' enough to pick the right team or slot machine."

Take John Daly, for instance. According to his book *John Daly: My Life In and Out of the Rough* (released last May), despite winning tens of millions on the PGA Tour, Daly estimates his gambling debts are somewhere between \$50 to \$60 million. "Any healthy person would have figured out they were in a losing battle long ago," says Perkinson. "But that's the point. This goes from a hobby to a sickness."

It's harder for athletes to see the warning signs because many have seemingly endless amounts of money and therefore the problem won't become obvious as quickly. Reasons NBA great Charles Barkley on the subject: "I don't consider it a problem because I can afford to gamble," he told ESPN last May. "It's just a stupid habit that I've got to get under control, because it's just not a good thing to be broke after all of these years."

So what are some clear warning signs? Says Perkinson: "If all of a sudden gambling is first and foremost in your mind, you have a problem. The gambler begins with smaller bets at first, then the illness wants bigger risks to get the same high in the brain."

What Perkinson is referring to is the long-described "rush" that kicks in when money is on the line, much like a runner's high. "It's actually often genetic," explains Perkinson. "There are usually other addicts they grew up with in their home or the athlete might have an anxiety disorder. The limbic system [which influences memory] in the brain becomes hooked on this gambling high. Two parts of the brain are involved; one part says, 'I've got to have it, and the other part says, 'Go get it.'"

Perkinson describes the advanced stage as when gambling takes over all other cognitive reasoning. "The gambler's mind is now always either planning the bet, making the bet or waiting for the bet to come in," he says. "That puts them in a brain high or pleasure high where they can separate themselves from the normal pain of life. But once the bet comes in they slip into a brain low where they are irritable or

depressed." And this isn't the worst result. In fact, Perkinson says it's estimated that 11 percent of gambling addicts commit suicide and 10 percent of the spouses of gambling addicts meet the same fate: "This disease won't just hurt you but everyone you care about."

September 11, 1985, seemed to seal the deal on a first-ballot Hall of Fame selection for Cincinnati Reds great Pete Rose. That night he broke Ty Cobb's record for career hits. We now know Rose bet on baseball and that the only way he'll earn a ticket to the Hall is if he buys one like every other paying customer.

Even though Michael Jordan didn't gamble his mega fortune away, gambling allegations in the early '90s cost him the respect of many. (After Jordan retired in 1993, the NBA investigated allegations of his gambling, and apparently found nothing of significance.) But that wasn't the case for "Golden Boy" Paul Hornung, the Green Bay Packers legend who was kicked out of football for a year in 1963 after betting up to \$500 on NFL games. His story ended on a good note, thanks to coach Vince Lombardi, who promised then-commissioner Pete Rozelle that Hornung would keep his nose clean. Hornung did, and finished his career with a Hall of Fame nod.

As the Hornung example attests, this addiction doesn't always have to wreck your life. But if your problem becomes public, you will have to repair your image. Publicist Randi Mitnick, who has worked with athletes such as Mark Messier, says the most important thing you can do is come clean.

Last year, Wayne Gretzky's wife Janet — along with former NHL standout Rick Tocchet and at least a half dozen other hockey players — were accused of being a part of a coast-to-coast gambling ring out of New Jersey. Gretzky faced the music quickly (expressing his love and support for his wife, and his own innocence).

"The public is extremely forgiving if you come forward right away," Mitnick says. "You may be embarrassed but it's an illness and people will accept that. Part of the problem is we hold athletes up to expectations they can't live up to. No matter what, make sure to get help so people see you're taking it seriously," she says. "Once you've treated the addiction, it can also be a positive thing to do public service announcements or go around to schools talking about the dangers of the problem. Fans will gain more respect for you when you get help and then help others."

One of the biggest reasons athletes turn to gambling is their competitive nature, but that doesn't mean gambling has to fulfill this craving. Many develop other habits —like playing music, getting involved in other sports, or giving to charities. As much as anyone, it's retired athletes who are susceptible to gambling because they're constantly looking for something to replace the excitement of the crowd and the thrill of taking themselves to the limit.

"Gambling is like any other addiction," Mitnick says. "It can be treated, but you have to make the first move." **OT**