

Game Day Gamble:

The Hidden Addiction Destroying College Lives as Football Returns

As students return to campus and college football fever grips the nation, a dangerous game is being played far from the stadium lights—one that's destroying young lives one bet at a time.

The Marathon Runner's Secret

Sam DeMello crossed the finish line of the 2013 San Francisco Marathon surrounded by cheering friends and family. To everyone watching, the 26-year-old tech professional had it all—six-figure salary, incredible fitness, loving girlfriend. But as the crowd celebrated, Sam felt only one thing: crushing shame.

His loved ones had no idea he was drowning in a sports betting addiction that would eventually cost him up to \$1 million over a decade. Even worse? He didn't realize it either.

"All of my friends would come to me and say: 'Congratulations, man, you're crushing it. We're so proud of you,'" DeMello recalls. "I would just feel this dissonance, because I felt so fraudulent."

Sam's story isn't unique—it's becoming the norm.

The Campus Crisis Hidden in Plain Sight

As college students settle into dorms this fall and football dominates weekend conversations, a silent epidemic is spreading. **Problem gambling among college students is occurring at rates 2-4 times higher than adults**, yet most young people don't even recognize they have a problem.

The numbers are staggering. Since states began legalizing sports betting in 2018, **online searches for gambling addiction help have surged 23% nationwide**—that's roughly 6.5 to 7.3 million desperate queries from people seeking help.

In states with online sports betting, the increases are even more dramatic:

- **Ohio: 67% increase** in addiction-related searches
- **Pennsylvania: 50% increase**
- **Massachusetts: 47% increase**
- **New York: 37% increase**

The money tells the story too: Total sports betting volume exploded from \$4.9 billion in 2017 to over \$121 billion in 2023, with 94% of wagers now placed online—meaning the casino is literally in every student's pocket.

"I Did Not Think That I Had an Addiction"

Like Sam, most young gamblers don't fit the stereotype of the desperate person at the horse track. They're honor students, athletes, future leaders—which makes the addiction even more insidious.

"We talk about gambling being the hidden addiction, because it's really easy to hide from other people, but it's also really easy to hide from yourself," Sam explains. "I did not think that I had an addiction."

Sam tried to quit more than 50 times. He would make it two or three days before relapsing. He lived with his fiancée for an entire year without her knowing about his gambling problem. He even gambled during elevator rides down from \$150-an-hour therapy sessions and checked his bets after relaxing flotation tank sessions designed to calm his mind.

The last thing he did before losing cell service at Burning Man? Check if his bets had won.

The College Football Season: A High-Risk Gauntlet

College football season creates a uniquely dangerous 15-week period that transforms casual students into compulsive gamblers. Here's what makes it so treacherous:

Week After Week of Opportunities: Unlike the Super Bowl or March Madness, college football provides continuous betting opportunities from August through January—130+ games every weekend for nearly four months straight.

The Ritual Becomes Addiction: What starts as "just making Saturday more interesting" quickly becomes an obsession. Students begin planning their entire weekends around game times, constantly checking odds, and feeling physically anxious when they can't bet.

Emotional Roller Coaster: College football is notoriously unpredictable. Upsets happen weekly, creating the perfect conditions for "chasing losses"—the most dangerous gambling behavior where students bet increasingly larger amounts trying to win back what they've lost.

Social Integration: In dorms and fraternities, betting becomes embedded in the social fabric. Students who don't bet feel left out of conversations, group chats blow up with betting tips, and there's constant peer pressure to "get in on the action."

The "Lock of the Week" Mentality: College students often believe their superior knowledge of teams, players, and matchups gives them an edge. This false confidence fueled by research and statistics makes losses feel even more devastating and personal.

Prime Vulnerability Window: The season coincides with students' most vulnerable time—adjusting to college life, managing stress, dealing with homesickness, and having unprecedented freedom with money.

Fantasy Football Gateway: Many students start with seemingly innocent fantasy leagues, then progress to daily fantasy sports, then to straight betting—often without recognizing they've crossed into gambling territory.

Bowl Season Escalation: The concentrated excitement of bowl games and playoffs in December/January creates a crescendo of betting activity right before winter break, when students have time to obsess over games and outcomes.

A New Student's Descent

Consider "Jake," a fictional composite based on real cases: A freshman arrives at State University with \$2,000 in birthday money. His roommates are all using betting apps, placing small wagers on weekend games. It seems harmless—even smart. Jake studies the teams, does research, treats it like investing.

By November, Jake has lost his birthday money and started betting his meal plan funds. By March Madness, he's taking cash advances on credit cards. By sophomore year, he's failing classes because he can't focus on anything but upcoming games. His parents think he's just struggling with college adjustment.

Jake's story plays out on campuses across America every semester.

The Science of Addiction: Why Smart Kids Fall Hard

Gambling addiction hijacks the same brain pathways as drug addiction. When Jake hits a big parlay, his brain floods with dopamine—the same chemical released by cocaine. Over time, his brain needs bigger and bigger bets to achieve the same high.

"With substances, you're actually physically injecting something into your body, whereas with problem gambling, it's all behavioral," explains Heather Eshleman from the Maryland Center of Excellence on Problem Gambling. "But chemically, it's exactly the same as any other type of addiction."

The stigma is often worse than with substance abuse because people assume it's a moral failing rather than a medical condition.

Revolutionary Solutions: Fighting Fire with Virtual Fire

At the University of Connecticut, researchers are pioneering a surprising solution: virtual reality therapy. Students put on VR headsets, enter a virtual casino, and use controllers to smash slot machines and burn playing cards.

"We'll track physiological responses and behavioral changes to see if this intervention helps cut down gambling habits," says Associate Professor Robert Astur. Preliminary results show participants have reduced gambling urges and dramatically improved ability to avoid risky behaviors after completing the two-week program.

If successful, this approach could revolutionize addiction treatment not just for gambling, but for other compulsive behaviors affecting college students.

The Warning Signs Parents and Students Must Know

Unlike substance abuse, gambling addiction has no physical symptoms. But there are red flags:

- **Mood swings** tied to game outcomes
- **Secretive behavior** around phone use and finances
- **Declining grades** during sports seasons
- **Borrowing money** or financial stress
- **Lying** about time spent on betting apps
- **Obsessive research** of teams and odds
- **Inability to watch games** without betting

What Happens Next?

Sam's turning point came when his gambling led to alcohol and drug problems—a common progression addiction experts see. He eventually founded Evive, a digital therapy app specifically for young gamblers, because traditional treatment programs felt irrelevant to his generation.

"It needs to become part of the American zeitgeist that you talk to your kids about sex and drugs and gambling," Sam says now, at 38 and in recovery.

Taking Action Before It's Too Late

For Students:

- Set app limits or delete betting apps before big game weekends
- Recognize that "investing" in sports is still gambling
- Talk to friends who seem obsessed with odds and outcomes
- Seek help immediately if gambling affects grades, relationships, or finances

For Parents:

- Include gambling in substance abuse conversations
- Monitor for personality changes during sports seasons
- Know that willpower alone won't cure gambling addiction
- Don't wait for rock bottom—early intervention saves lives

Emergency Help:

- National Problem Gambling Helpline: **1-800-GAMBLER** (24/7)
- Crisis Text Line: Text HOME to 741741
- Campus counseling centers now increasingly offer gambling addiction resources

The Bottom Line

As we cheer for touchdowns and celebrate college traditions this fall, let's not ignore the young lives being destroyed in dorm rooms across America. The explosive growth of sports betting has created a public health crisis that's hiding behind the excitement of game day.

Sam DeMello's marathon finish line moment of shame doesn't have to be every student's story. But it will be—unless we start treating gambling addiction with the same seriousness we give other threats to student wellbeing.

The game has changed. Our response needs to change too.

If you or someone you know is struggling with gambling addiction, call 1-800-GAMBLER or visit ncpgambling.org for immediate help.