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Betting Against the Odds: Sports Gambling at Hampton University

Kristian Beckley lay atop his bed at Hampton University and scrolled through his phone on a Wednesday night, waiting for the wave of sleep to wash over him. Before the surf arrived, he opened a familiar blue-and-white app belonging to “America’s Number One Sportsbook.”

Beckley remembered the next day was Thursday Night Football, and the Tampa Bay Buccaneers were visiting Mercedes-Benz Stadium, home of their divisional rival, the Atlanta Falcons. An opportunity to make a little cash.

He just started using FanDuel this NFL season, but Beckley is learning fast. He did some research and noticed that Falcons’ running back Tyler Allgeier had 60 rushing yards in the last game. The Buccaneers, meanwhile, were getting run all over by opposing defenses, allowing more than 100 rushing yards in each of their first four games.

On the other side, Tampa Bay wide receiver Mike Evans just had the best game of his season with 94 yards and a touchdown. In Beckley’s mind, Evans was primed to dominate an Atlanta defense that allowed more than 80 receiving yards to two receivers in its last game.

Easy money, right? Allgeier should’ve continued his rushing success, and all signs pointed to Evans having another big day. Beckley believed so, which is why he took props on both players.



Hampton student Trevor Whitaker and his friends flip through NFL RedZone to watch their player props. This is a weekly occurrence for Whitaker. Photo credit: Wynton Jackson

Evans needed 60 receiving yards and a touchdown, while Allgeier had to get 36 rushing yards. He strung the bets into a parlay, turned his phone off, and the wave crashed ashore.

Such is the life of a sports bettor.

Beckley’s case is not an isolated instance. In fact, he’s emblematic of a rising tide of young sports gamblers.

The Experts - How Did We Get Here?

In 2018, the Supreme Court overturned the Professional and Amateur Sports Protection Act of 1992. The ruling paved the way for each state to legalize sports gambling.

Five years later, the NCAA published a report on the prevalence of sports betting among college-age individuals. Of the 3,527 respondents, 58 percent of them engaged in the activity.

The NCAA’s report came with no surprise. Sportsbooks, such as FanDuel, are deliberately targeting younger audiences, particularly young men, to build their consumer bases.

Virginia, which legalized sports betting in 2020, reflects the NCAA’s study. 58 percent of 18-24-year-olds have engaged in the activity to some degree, with 10-16 percent of them developing a gambling problem.

“Young men are a brand new opportunity to make money,” said the president of the Virginia Council on Problem Gambling, Carolyn Hawley.

“This is the largest group that we have calling our helpline. It’s amazing; our demographic has completely changed. It’s very often within a year’s time, they’ve developed a problem.”

Not only are young men a new opportunity, but they’re also at a unique intersection. A 2015 report in the Journal of Gambling Studies found that young, unmarried men living by themselves are the most likely to bet. They tend to have fewer financial and familial responsibilities and are more likely to consume sports in social settings with like-minded friends.

The growth and commercialization of gambling is nothing short of astonishing. For most of American history, gambling was a subject of taboo. A Pennsylvanian law in 1847 labeled gamblers as “parasites.” Today, they’re advertised as kings.

DraftKings, to be specific.

There isn’t a form of media that hasn’t been touched by a gambling advertisement. They are now proudly broadcast across television networks, radio stations, podcasts and websites, and include celebrities any 20-year-old would recognize.

PrizePicks partnered with internet comedian Druski. DraftKings has a series of commercials with LeBron James and Kevin Hart. BetMGM plasters Jamie Foxx across all its platforms, much like ESPN Bet does with ‘First Take’ host Stephen A. Smith. The goal is to make betting synonymous with sports.

It’s working. Donald McCartney doesn’t see an end in sight.

“The only way to stop it is to not have the Internet at all,” he said.

McCourtney is the Lead Problem Gambling Coordinator for the Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services. He regularly

hosts seminars spreading awareness of gambling consequences, such as depression, anxiety, sleep deprivation, and bankruptcy. Unlike other addictions, problem gambling is hard to track. There aren’t as many tells for a gambling addict as there are for an alcoholic who may reek of their last drink. It’s why McCartney calls it the “hidden addiction.”

“You can’t smell it, you can’t see it, you can’t hear it. It’s elusive,” he said.

McCourtney recalled a college student who was well on his way to receiving a doctorate in dental surgery. Instead of earning his ticket to a successful career, a sports gambling addiction turned his life upside down.

“He blew his last semester, he didn’t have any money to pay for it,” McCartney said. “He’d sold his car. His family wanted to get involved so he could finish his last semester so he could go on to his residency.

“He was a very good soccer player. When he went from undergrad to his medical training, he did something to his Achilles tendon, so he couldn’t play soccer anymore. So where does he displace all that energy? Where does he get all the accolades? Where’s the adrenaline rush? Where’s the dopamine high? Well, he got introduced to sports betting.”

McCourtney has been working in the prevention arena for over four decades. He’s seen firsthand the power of education in reducing alcohol and substance abuse. Gambling, though, has always been a throughline in his career. He’s stunned to see how quickly it’s been accepted and adopted into the American zeitgeist.

“I spent 20 years working and living in Las Vegas, Nevada,” he said. “The entire time I was there, the city maintained that they were not going to allow a major league sports team. Well, now you’ve got the Raiders there, and soon you’re going to have [the Athletics].

“It’s all about money. Money is what drives this in. People want to make money, they want to have businesses that make money.”



Hampton University alum and ESPN West Palm radio personality Theo Dorsey has a promotion code for PrizePicks, a prominent sportsbook, on his show “Theoretically Speaking.” Photo credit: Wynton Jackson

Student Account – Kristian Beckley

The sports betting students at Hampton University sit at each major intersection. Many are unmarried young men, a prime target for sportsbooks. Additionally, the NCAA report found that African Americans were the most likely racial demographic to bet at 68 percent, a particularly alarming statistic for a Historically Black College and University.

More importantly, the Hampton students are just that: college students. The enticing promise of riches isn't exclusive to sports franchises in Las Vegas. Beckley and his peers know the potential that rests just a few clicks away on their phones.

“Honestly, I bet because if I hit, I'm set for a year,” Beckley said. “If I got a thousand dollars, I'm putting aside money for tattoos. I can go to my homecoming and still have enough left to splurge on myself, my girlfriend, stuff I need. I bet so that I have money in case I win, and because it makes watching the games a lot more fun.”

Beckley was disappointed, then, while watching the Tampa Bay Buccaneer defense repulse all six rushing attempts from Allgeier. The Falcons' running back finished with a measly 12 rushing yards, well below the required 36 yards. Even though Beckley correctly assumed that Evans would hit his goals, Allgeier's poor performance killed the entire parlay.

Rather than getting discouraged, Beckley created another parlay that following Sunday. Once again, though, all but one of the props hit. This time, San Francisco 49ers receiver Jauan Jennings failed to score a touchdown after hauling in three the previous week.

So tantalizingly close to a big payday, yet so far. Beckley only put in \$6, but with certain promotions, he would've won more than \$1,300. The FanDuel parlay displayed green checks down the board, but a stark red X halted Beckley's progress. Even thinking back on the situation elicited anguish and regret. If only Jennings found the endzone...

Beckley recognizes the risks. He would do it all over again.

“There are some bets where you throw away \$5, \$6 and you have everything to win, right,” he said. “Imagine if somebody told you, ‘Hey, if you give me \$6, I'll give you a thousand right now.’ You would do it. Especially when you get close, that's how they really get you. Like when you bet \$5 and you could win a thousand, but you're only one leg away. You just have so much confidence in yourself because you're like, ‘Damn, I was one person's job away from having that much money.’”

His faith was rewarded. Two weeks later, he hit the jackpot: a six-leg parlay that spat out more than \$1,500. More than enough for some tattoos.

Beckley strongly believes he could stop betting if it became a problem. “I'm not a person who's easily addicted to things,” he said. He also feels, though, as if he's “cracked the code” on sports betting.

Student Account – Jalynn Reynolds

Jalynn Reynolds is another Hampton student and sports betting locksmith. He's the founder of First Class Sports Betting, a consulting agency that provides patrons with picks on various sporting events. Since starting First Class over a year ago, he's built a team of 10 people and already has 160 subscribers.

Reynolds and his staff host a Discord server where they interact directly with customers. There are two chat rooms: one for free users, and another for premium (\$5 entry) subscribers. The paying customers receive better picks from Reynolds' crew.

There isn't a sport outside of Reynolds' purview.

“I don't bet on just one or two sports,” he said. “I bet on basketball, hockey, football, baseball. I've bet on Chinese basketball. It really gets like that.”

Unlike Beckley and other students, Reynolds doesn't regularly do “lottos,” or lottery bets. He believes he's discovered a different, more secure system.

“I don't bet like everybody else bets,” he said. “[Betting] \$5 to win \$100 or \$10 to win \$10,000, that's the complete opposite of how you sports bet. That's how you lose your money. That's why they're making so much money off of people. The goal is to flip your money. Go from \$24 to \$42, then \$42 to \$83, \$83 to \$163, and so on.

“I'm not saying don't do the lottos, but you have to have the flips in there to secure your money, because they're going to hit 90 percent of the time. The bets I place are in the 90th percentile. You want to eliminate as much chance and probability from your parlay.”

Because of First Class, Reynolds bets almost every day, although he, too, doesn't believe it's a problem.

“I've asked myself that question a lot of times and I just wondered what problem I could have because I make so much money off of it,” he said. “Unless I'm making too much money. Is that a bad thing?”

Student Accounts – Bucking the Trend

Other students at Hampton have recognized the potential pitfalls of sports betting and have stepped away from it, if only temporarily. Eric Watson had to take a break after the NBA Finals this summer, but he resumed once the NFL season started.

Xavier Wallace is completely done with it. He tried sports betting for a couple of months, but one day, he took the under on Philadelphia 76ers superstar center Joel Embiid. That night, Embiid had a career-high 70 points and 18 rebounds.

Wallace took it as a sign to delete the app.

“I feel like it would have been a waste of money, knowing that I have stuff to pay for,” he said. “I'm a college student; I've got tuition to pay for and all this other stuff. I've got food that I had to pay for if I got hungry. I had to make a decision. I was like, ‘Do I want

to keep putting money into this, or do I just want to try it out?”

Not all students are as self-aware as Watson and Wallace. They may not know when to stop or who to turn to for help. Hampton University doesn't have the experts or resources available for such students, as admitted by its Student Counseling Center.

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 New Orleans Saints @ Atlanta Falcons SEP 29, 1:00PM ET
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 MONEYLINE
 Minnesota Vikings @ Green Bay Packers SEP 29, 1:02PM ET
- Jonathan Taylor Over 74.5 +101**
 JONATHAN TAYLOR - RUSHING YDS
 Pittsburgh Steelers @ Indianapolis Colts SEP 29, 1:03PM ET
- Jauan Jennings +424**
 ANYTIME 1ST HALF TD SCORER
 New England Patriots @ San Francisco... SEP 29, 4:05PM ET

- Terry McLaurin**
 ANY TIME TOUCHDOWN SCORER
 Progress: 2/1
- Jayden Daniels Over 225.5**
 JAYDEN DANIELS - PASSING YDS
 Progress: 269/225.5
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 ISAIAH LIKELY - RECEIVING YDS
 Progress: 27/23.5

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 ANY TIME TOUCHDOWN SCORER
 Progress: 1/1
- Jameson Williams Over 44.5**
 JAMESON WILLIAMS - RECEIVING YDS
 Progress: 76/44.5
- Jalen Hurts Over 1.5 +136**
 JALEN HURTS - PASSING TDS
 Progress: 2/1.5

Cleveland Browns	0	10	0	6	16	Finished
Philadelphia Eagles	0	10	3	7	20	

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TOP LEFT: Beckley's failed parlay due to 49ers receiver Jauan Jennings. Photo Credit: Kristian Beckley

BOTTOM LEFT: Beckley's successful parlay with a payout of more than \$1,500. Photo credit: Kristian Beckley

ABOVE: Reynold's Instagram page for First Class Sports Betting. The page has a mix of photos and videos promoting Reynolds' picks, as well as links to the Discord server and website.

National Concern

On a grander scale, the state of Virginia doesn't have the necessary funding to properly treat problem gambling. Even at a national level, legislators are oblivious to the gaping hole in problem gambling research and treatment options.

The National Council on Problem Gambling estimates the social cost of problem gambling at about \$14 billion, affecting nine million adults. In 2023, the federal government collected \$250 million from taxes on sports betting. How much of that money went back into prevention and treatment work?

"None," Hawley said. "There's no federal funding for gambling. That's why our major institutions have no funding, even though the federal government collects money from gambling."

Hawley believes that lack of help stems from a fundamental misunderstanding about gambling addictions. Because it's "hidden," people don't take it as seriously. Parents may be more inclined to fund their children's gambling practices since they believe it's not as damaging as alcohol or drug abuse.

"People think gambling problems are somebody that's just sitting at a slot machine and playing it over and over and over again," said Anne Rogers, the Problem Gambling Prevention Coordinator at the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services.

Hawley, Rogers and McCourtney will continue their problem gambling education with or without federal aid. They have no other choice but to hope and wait. Hawley is working to branch out to college campuses and conduct seminars there.

In the meantime, Hampton students are going to continue betting. For those hoping to cash out a jackpot like Beckley, Wallace provided salient advice.

"If you want to do it, that's on you," he said. "It's your money that you're spending. It's not a precise thing; it's sports and anything can happen."

"Do it at your own risk, because you could win a lot, or you could lose a lot."