

How the explosion of prop betting threatens the integrity of pro sports

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Miami Heat guard Terry Rozier was one of 34 people arrested as part of a wide-ranging investigation into illegal gambling.

Scott Taetsch/Getty Images

When I first heard about the arrests of Portland Trail Blazers coach Chauncey Billups, Miami Heat guard Terry Rozier and former NBA player Damon Jones in connection to federal investigations involving illegal gambling, I couldn't help but think of a recent moment in my sports writing class.

I was showing my students a clip from an NFL game between the Jacksonville Jaguars and Kansas City Chiefs. Near the end of play, Jaguars quarterback Trevor Lawrence threw a perfect pass to receiver Brian Jones Jr. to secure a critical first down. Out of the blue, a student groaned and said that he'd lost US\$50 on that throw.

I thought of that moment because it revealed how ubiquitous sports betting has become, how much the types of bets have changed over time, and – given these trends – how it's naive to think players won't continue to be tempted to game the system.

The prop bet hits it big

I've been following the evolution of sports gambling for about a decade in my position as chair of Penn State's sports journalism program.

Back when legal American sports betting was mostly confined to Las Vegas, the standard bets tended to be tied to picking a winner or which team would cover a point spread.

But ahead of the 1986 Super Bowl between the Chicago Bears and the overmatched New England Patriots, casinos offered bets on whether Bears defensive lineman – and occasional running back – William “Refrigerator” Perry would score a touchdown. The excitement around that sideshow kept fan interest going during a 46-10 blowout.

Perry did end up scoring, and the prop bet took off from there.

Prop bets are wagers that depend on an outcome within a game but not its final result. They can often involve an athlete's individual performance in some statistical category – for instance, how many yards a running back will rush for, how many rebounds a basketball center will secure, or how many strikeouts a pitcher will have. They've become routine offerings on sports betting menus.

For example: As I write this, I am looking at a FanDuel account I opened years ago, seeing that, for the Green Bay Packers-Pittsburgh Steelers game currently in progress, I can place a wager on which player will score a touchdown, how many yards each quarterback will throw for and much, much more. As the game progresses, the odds constantly shift – allowing for what are called “live bets.”

Returning to my student who lost the bet on Lawrence’s pass completion: It’s possible he’d placed a bet on Lawrence to throw fewer than a set number of yards. Or he could have been part of a fantasy league, which is also dependent on individual player performances.

Either way, a problem with prop bets, from an anti-corruption perspective, is that an individual can often control the outcome. You don’t need a group of players to be in on it – which is what happened during the infamous Black Sox Scandal, when eight players on the Chicago White Sox were accused of conspiring with gamblers to intentionally lose the 1919 World Series.

In the indictment against him, Rozier is accused of telling a co-defendant to pass along information to particular bettors that he planned to leave a March 2023 game early – a move everyone involved knew meant he would not reach his statistical benchmarks for the game. They could then place bets that he wouldn’t hit those marks.

In baseball, meanwhile, Luis Ortiz of the Cleveland Guardians was placed on leave during the 2025 season and is under investigation for possibly illegally wagering on the outcome of two pitches he threw. MLB authorities are essentially trying to determine if he deliberately threw balls as opposed to strikes in two instances. (Yes, prop bets have become so granular that you can even bet on whether a pitcher will throw a ball or a strike on an individual pitch.)

An exploding market with no end in sight

The popularity of prop bets feeds into a worldwide sports gambling industry that has experienced explosive growth and shows no sign of slowing.

Since the U.S. Supreme Court in 2018 ruled that states could decide on whether to allow sports betting, 39 states plus the District of Columbia have done so.

The leagues and media are more than just bystanders. FanDuel and DraftKings are official sports betting partners of the NBA and the NFL.

In the days after the Supreme Court ruling, I wondered whether journalists would embrace sports betting. These days, ESPN not only has a betting show, but it also has a betting app.

According to the American Gaming Association, sportsbooks collected a record \$13.71 billion in revenue in 2024 from about \$150 billion in wagers. A study released in February 2025 by Siena and St. Bonaventure universities found that nearly half of American men have an online sports betting account.

But those figures don't begin to touch the worldwide sports betting market, especially the illegal one. The United Nations, in a 2021 report, reported that up to \$1.7 trillion is wagered annually in illegal betting markets.

The U.N. report warned that it had found a "staggering scale, manifestation, and complexity of corruption and organized crime in sport at the global, regional, and national levels."

Who's the boss?

In early October 2025, I attended a conference of Play the Game, a Denmark-based organization that promotes "democratic values in world sports." Its occasional gatherings attract experts from around the world who are interested in keeping sports fair and safe for everyone.

One of the most sobering topics was illegal, online sportsbooks that feature wagering on all levels of sport, from the lowest levels of European soccer on up.

It sounded somewhat familiar. This summer at the Little League World Series, which my students covered for The Associated Press, managers complained about offshore sportsbooks offering lines on the tournament, which is played by 12-year-old amateurs.

And with so much illegal wagering in the world, the issue of match fixing was bound to come up.

One session screened a recent German documentary on match fixing. Meanwhile, Anca-Maria Gherghel, a Ph.D. candidate at Sheffield Hallam University and senior researcher for EPIC Global Solutions, both in northern England, told me how she had interviewed a professional female soccer player for a team in Cyprus. The player described how she and her teammates were routinely approached with lucrative offers to throw matches.

Put it all together – the vast sums of money at play and the relative ease of fixing a prop bet, let alone a match – and you cannot be surprised at the NBA scandal.

I used to think that gambling was just a segment of the larger sports industry. Now, I wonder whether I had it exactly backward.

Has sports just become a segment of the larger gambling industry?

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