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English 350H

05 October 2022

Looking at the Past, Present, and Future: Why the Trend of Legalized Gambling?

“ONE IN THE MORNING! EVERYBODY GET OUT!” These words ring in my ears as I’m blinded by the lights that flash on at the bar for the first time in hours. After I rally together a group of some of my friends, we shuffle behind the hundreds of other drunk kids trying to make their way to the front of the bar. Together, we are all guided by the few meathead bouncers yelling in our ears. For some reason, they seem to be more pissed off than usual tonight. I recognize many of them, as my friends and I come to this bar frequently when we aren’t at college.

The bar is named Six Strings, which in my opinion is the least creative name an owner could possibly come up with for a country-music themed bar. They serve below average barbecue food during the day coupled with wildly overpriced drinks at night. Thinking about it now, I’m still disappointed that I paid \$9 for a Miller Lite there. One of the few draws to this bar is that they have live music with a massive dance floor in front of it, which is where most of my night has been spent. This will probably contribute to some hearing damage when I’m an old man. Really the only other reason this bar is popular amongst my friends and other local people in their 20’s is because it’s about 5 minutes down the road from our hometown, right in front of Gillette Stadium in Foxboro, Massachusetts. Patriots Place is the plaza that the bar sits in, right next to the rows of other cookie cutter chain restaurants, stores, and hotels. Since this plaza was built in 2010, right in the middle of the New England Patriots streak of success, I believe that the

money owner Robert Kraft made from the team is what resulted in him building the development. There have been many other new additions to the area in the last 15 years since the start of the Patriots dynasty, one of which is a casino about 5 miles away called Plainridge Park Casino. “For the New England gambler, Plainridge Park Casino provides the excitement, winning and comfort that our players can expect. Enjoy the latest and greatest slot games, video poker and electronic table games while enjoying drink service in our open-floor casino.” their website reads. Sounds tempting, even if you don’t gamble, right?

If you couldn’t tell from my earlier description, I am not a fan of Six Strings. It is by far my least favorite of the local spots near my hometown to get a drink, and I tried hard to convince my friends to go somewhere else for the night. My opinion of the bar is not the popular one however, as all my friends seem to love it, so that was where we ended up for the night. As one of my buddies lights a cigarette outside the bar, he proposes an idea that just might turn my night around: “Anyone down for Plainridge?” he asks in between drags. Half of the group is a little too drunk and the other half is tired, but the potential to make some quick money appeals to all of us. Once we convince our friend who stayed home for the night to drive us, we are on our way to the casino, filled with the sense of hope that always comes before these alcohol fueled trips.

Despite only being a few minutes from the house I’ve lived in my entire life, Plainridge casino feels like a different world. When you enter, you are immediately greeted by the bright lights of slot machines and the smell of cigarettes filling the room. A mediocre singer is still performing on a stage despite the fact it is 1:30 in the morning and most of the people in the casino could care less about her performance. They are all just focused on their next bet. My friends and I take our seats on the roulette table. My first bet of the night is always \$20 on black, and I stick to my routine. There is one friend in our group who works full time already, and

consequently has a lot more money than the rest of us. He decides to “ride with me,” but places a much larger bet of \$200 on black. As the little white ball rolls around the outside of the wheel, a small thrill comes over me, and I imagine everyone else at the table feels the same. “Come on black!” my friend exclaims. When the ball enters the wheel, the small ticking noise exhilarates us a little more. When the ball finally finds a home in one of the slots on the wheel, I can’t immediately see the color. My friend shouts for joy, and eventually I can see it has landed on black. A quick and easy \$20 for me, and \$200 for him. Having already been disappointed in how much money I have spent at the bar earlier, I immediately cash my chips, and carefully place the twenty-dollar bill in my pocket to ensure I don’t drop it. My friend is a bit gutsier than me and decides to stay at the table and continue to try his luck. It’s always difficult to avoid placing more bets when everyone around you is, but I have learned this lesson the hard way to get out while you’re ahead.

As I now focus my attention on the rest of the casino, the whole scene seems a bit sad. I realize that the people constantly placing money into the slot machines and pulling the lever could live right down the road from me. They could be aunts, uncles, parents, grandparents, or siblings of the people I know and love, and I’m watching them slowly waste their money. Performing this monotonous activity of pulling the lever over and over again, they almost seem like robots. I also realize that my friend has already lost all his winnings and is now in the hole for \$400. I acknowledge that the casino always has a statistical advantage over the player, so any hope that you have of going in and winning big is in some ways false. Even with this awareness, I still made the trip for the night, and I even came out of roulette \$20 richer. The paradox that this presents has always been interesting to me. Is there any possibility that someone can consistently win money gambling? Why would so many people indulge in such an activity if

there was no hope? Is it a gambling addiction, and have the casinos and the bookies simply tricked all of us? Why have public attitudes around certain types of gambling shifted so drastically in recent years from strict disapproval to actual legalization by many states? These questions are something I regularly ponder, and I may never know the answers. Either way, I find gambling to be an incredibly fascinating thing, and a trip to the casino like this is only the tip of the iceberg when looking at the nature of this vice.

Before discussing things like the history of gambling, legalization, and addiction, I feel it's important to understand the activity itself. When you google the definition of the verb "gamble," two separate definitions come up. The first says, "play games of chance for money, or to bet," while the second reads, "take risky action in hope of a desired result." I prefer the second definition because it is much broader, and I feel that for a person to gamble, money does not always have to be involved in the risk. Furthermore, when placing money at risk, you are consequently risking other things, such as your relationships, freedom, and time. Since there are a wide variety of different ways to gamble, it is difficult to summarize for somebody who has no prior knowledge of gambling. The best way I can try and define it is to think that there are 2 separate divisions between games in today's world: legalized gambling and illegal gambling. Legalized gambling is what you think of when you hear about a casino or Las Vegas. In this side of the game, there is a strict age requirement to participate, either 18+ or 21+ depending on the state. Any legal gambling establishment in the country will check your ID at the door to ensure you are of age. These establishments also generate millions of dollars in tax revenue for states every year, which is part of the argument for many states to legalize. In illegal gambling, any person can set up a website for players to place their bets. Now the house is simply one bookie,

or a network of bookies, instead of an established casino. There is no age requirement or verification in any way, and you can pretty much become a player by simply asking. These websites use the same odds that a legal gambling establishment will, and the bets are paid by using cash or another under the table transaction. Obviously, this results in no tax dollars being generated or taken from either side of a bet.

From both divisions, legal and illegal gambling, I would say there are 3 subdivisions. Other people may argue more or less of a breakdown, but I feel you can separate any type of bet into the category of a sports bet, a table game, or a slot machine. Sports betting is the deepest of the 3 with many different types of bets and things to bet on. Any bookie or casino will allow you to bet on any sport you can think of between baseball, football, basketball, horse racing, hockey, soccer, track and field, lacrosse, water polo, curling, ping pong, and many more. The most common bet to place on these sports will be the spread. A points spread is what the casinos think is a fair evaluation of two teams compared to each other. For example, last week the Patriots were 9 and a half point underdogs against the Green Bay Packers. If you were to bet "Patriots +9.5," this means you think the Patriots will cover the spread, or that they will lose by 9 points or less, or even win. The opposite of this would be to bet "Packers -9.5," meaning you believe the Packers will win the game by more than 9 points. The Packers won the game 27 to 24, so those who bet "Patriots +9.5" won their bets. The odds for both sides of this bet are typically -110, meaning you must bet \$110 to win \$100, \$11 to win \$10, or any amount to win the other side of the proportion. This means you could wager the same amount on two bets, win one out of the two, and still lose money. This is where the common saying, "The house always wins," comes from.

You may be wondering how can you gamble on sports that do not involve scoring? This is where another popular type of bet comes in, which is known as a “money line” bet. This is simply picking a team or person to win the sporting event. The casino or bookie will set the odds for this, requiring you to risk more to bet on the favorite, and the potential to win more by betting on the underdog. For example, the Patriots odds to win last week were +350, meaning if you bet \$100 and the Patriots won, you would make \$350. The Packers were the favorite, and their odds were -435, so you would have to bet \$435 to win \$100. This style is applicable to any sport, such as any type of racing event, or even an Olympic sport like gymnastics. I’ve even heard stories of certain illegal bookies that set odds for political elections with each candidate having money line odds. Donald Trump was the favorite in the last presidential election, so anyone who bet the underdog Joe Biden potentially doubled their money. Another website, in a rather inhumane way, set odds for “First Celebrity to Pass Away,” giving odds for about 20 celebrities they named. Those who picked the Queen of England won their bets earlier this year. The last common type of sports bet I will discuss is the “over/under” bet. The line for this will be something like “over/under 48.5 points.” By picking the under, you think the combined number of points scored by both teams will be below the set line, or in the example, 48 points or less. Winning an over bet would require the combined score of both teams to be 49 points or more. The odds for both will typically be -110, just as the spread bets are, because the house always has to win.

Table games are a whole different breed than sports betting. This is what you will typically see people playing most in a casino. There are hundreds of different table games that you could find in different casinos, so it is impossible to cover all of them. Some popular table games are roulette, poker, craps, and blackjack. While you may believe that these are only

accessible to people who visit casinos, and consequently people above the age requirement, this is not the case. Many illegal gambling websites set up by bookies will have access to a “virtual casino.” This is made possible by certain casinos having a live video feed of the table games, allowing members of the gambling website to place bets as they please. Keep in mind these players can be of any age, all the while participating in the same game as legal adults at the casino. The same can be said for slot machine gambling. Many illegal books will have virtual slots, where a player can run up a tab as much as they like on a virtual slot machine regardless of their age.

This all probably seems overwhelming right? Good. It’s supposed to be overwhelming. Now imagine you’re a teenager who just hit his first bet and has \$10 in his pocket he didn’t have 5 minutes ago. Imagine the options running through your head of what you can do with this money, where you can risk it next and turn the \$10 into \$20. No matter what time of day it is, no matter where you are in the world, how old you are, or how intoxicated you might be, there is always something you can gamble on. With technology, you don’t have to fly to Las Vegas anymore to play roulette. You can do it in your bed at 3 AM on a Tuesday. All the football games you’ve bet on Sunday have ended? Well there **are** 20 horse’s races in Japan and Australia going on the rest of the night. Early in the morning, the French horse races come on, and those will go until the afternoon when the races in America start. You could spend your time on this until next weekend comes around, and maybe you want to bet on the Patriots. You could take the spread, money line, the over or under, and countless other things I didn’t even cover; like player prop bets, team totals, parlays, hell you can even bet on the coin toss if you want. The

possibilities presented by this have made gambling addiction all that more common and harder to quit than it already was.

The Mayo Clinic defines this addiction as: “Compulsive gambling, also called gambling disorder, is the uncontrollable urge to keep gambling despite the toll it takes on your life. Gambling means that you're willing to risk something you value in the hope of getting something of even greater value. Gambling can stimulate the brain's reward system much like drugs or alcohol can, leading to addiction” (MayoClinic.org) The National Center for Responsible Gaming (the term they use in laws for gambling) states that approximately 1 percent of the adult male population in the United States suffers from a gambling problem, and that approximately 6 to 9 percent of young adults in the country experience problems related to gambling. They also say that the addiction can lead to similar withdrawal symptoms as drugs and alcohol. Currently, there is no known treatment for gambling addiction, other than cognitive therapy, consisting of doing things like going to support group meetings and talking to other addicts and therapists (NCRG). If you do the math, that's about 1.6 million people in this country alone that have a gambling problem. You may be questioning how is this possible for so many adults to become so addicted to something that involves no drugs or alcohol, and something that is completely legal and common in a lot of states around the country. I frequently wonder the same thing, but I have learned from with multiple people over the years how legitimate of an illness a gambling addiction is.

My grandfather is pretty much your stereotypical, old school, Italian grandfather on the surface. He loves the classic Italian foods like stuffed peppers and cured meats, as well as football, movies like *The Godfather* and *A Bronx Tale*, and Frank Sinatra. If you couldn't tell from my previous mentioning of him in class, I am super close with my grandfather. I make a

point to try and call him every Monday night when I'm away at school because I feel some amount of guilt that I don't see him or my grandmother for 3 months at a time. Something that he and I always talk about during the fall is how we did betting the NFL games the past Sunday. This has surprisingly become something we've bonded over a lot, discussing different teams and how the different games turned out, along with what our picks were and whether they were winners or losers. He has been gambling for nearly his entire life, literally having gone to the horse track with his father for the first time at 4 years old. This means that he's racked up almost 75 years of gambling experience under his belt. I've heard jokes about how on his first 4 dates with my grandmother, they went to the racetrack to bet on the horses. "Can't we go somewhere else other than the track?" a young Lana Capizzano implored. "What's wrong with the track?" Jimmy replied. Obviously, they would change it up for their next dates, as I don't think my grandmother could have lasted much longer hanging out at a gambling establishment like this.

There's the slightly sadder story of when my grandmother gave my grandfather \$2 to bet for her when he was going to the track with his friends. The horse she picked out of the newspaper in one of the first races of the day was a longshot, but actually ended up winning around \$50. However, my grandfather couldn't seem to walk away while he was ahead, instead trying his luck with the money he had taken for himself, and when that was gone with the \$50 my grandmother's horse had won earlier. By the time the call to the gate played for the last race of the day, he was flush out of money, forcing him to lie when he got back home that the horse my grandmother picked had lost. A few days later when he came home from work, a nice dinner was set up, with a bowl over his plate. "What's all this?" he asked in surprise at the fancy set up. "Oh, I made your favorite meal!" my grandmother responded. Completely confused at this random occurrence, my grandfather sat down and lifted the bowl from his plate to reveal that

day's newspaper, with the race results from a few days prior. My grandmother's horse was circled in bold pen, declaring she had caught him in the lie. While years later we can reflect and laugh about it, she was very angry at the time, and made him work extra hours until he earned that money back.

Even darker are the stories he's told me about friends he had back in his younger years getting mixed in with the wrong crowd and getting in too deep. This was back when gambling was a much shadier activity, all done completely under the table and out of the public eye. Friends of his likely had a gambling problem, and back in the 60's that was like a handcuff with a lost key that could result in a decade of financial burden. Gambling past your means meant borrowing money from certain people who would charge insanely high interest rates, otherwise referred to as the "vig." Doing this is like falling in a spiral into a 50-foot dark hole that there's no coming out of for many years to come. Thankfully, my grandfather was either lucky enough or smart enough that he never ended up in a situation like this, but the cautionary tales he has told me about people he knew back in the day have made me much more responsible when it comes to betting.

When I first told him my friends and I had been dabbling in sports betting my freshman year of college, I expected him to express a level of interest or approval in this activity. Instead, a look of immediate disappointment and sadness came across his face. He didn't want me to end up in the same situation he had seen time and time again, owing money I don't have and not being able to control a habit. To this day, whenever we discuss betting, he is sure to warn me to be responsible and be as self-aware as possible to avoid developing a problem. While the previous stories I told make him seem like he cannot control his habit, they all came from before he had children. After having my mom and her brother, he was sure to reel in his gambling ways

and ensure he never ended up in a situation he couldn't get out of. I am very thankful for my grandfather looking out for me, as without his insight and guidance, I may have ended up betting past my means and putting myself in a tough hole.

Don't get me wrong, it's not like I've ever met anyone with mob ties or that they even operate in the small-time gambling that my friends and I participate in. Any bookie I know is just a college kid looking to make some extra money to buy beer on the weekends. Even so, you can probably imagine it isn't a good idea to try and get out of paying a considerable debt to a bookie on the tab you've racked up like some of my friends have. In this modern-day world of betting, with no age verifications, and 24/7 access to something to bet on, I've had multiple friends spiral into what I would consider a sickness. Some have taken the risk of simply not paying their debt and waiting to see if a bookie comes to collect their money. Unlike what probably would have happened 60 years ago, they all thankfully ended up safe and sound, but they spent a considerable amount of time looking over their shoulder and avoiding the person they owed money. Others have taken the high road and paid the debt, but then consequently had to work two jobs and 60-hour weeks to keep up with both their financial obligations and their gambling debt.

I would probably need 5 or 6 hands just to count all the people I know who bet on sports, and it seems like in today's world it is nearly guaranteed that a sports fan in their 20's will have access to a website that allows them to bet. I often wonder why this is so common. I remember when I was younger, and I would watch the Patriots or the Red Sox with my dad, no one I know having money on the game, but still being emotionally invested and overjoyed when our team would win. It seems so pure now, and while I still am thrilled when these teams win even without a bet, I feel a level of sympathy for any young teenager first getting involved with

gambling. I sincerely hope they don't develop a problem, and that they can maintain this innocent fandom of just being happy with your home team winning a game.

Having heard the cautionary tales my grandfather has told me, as well as a few from my friends, and how gambling addiction develops in a similar way to a drug or alcohol addiction, you may be wondering, "Why the fuck is any of this being legalized?" Believe it or not, there are many strong arguments supporting the legalization of sports betting and other gambling throughout the United States. One of the strongest is to bring it into the public eye and out of the fringes of society that it was in the mid 20th century. I agree with this to an extent. I feel an adult should be able to place a bet and have some fun if they desire, so doing it in an established casino or on a legitimate website is much better than having to find an under the table bookie. I do not want to sound like a hypocrite telling of the dangers of betting, because if it hasn't become clear by now, I too enjoy placing a couple bets on the weekend. I am thankful that I can now do this in a legal manner, and I don't have to risk getting involved in the wrong crowd and getting in legal trouble for placing a bet thanks to the legalization movement that has been going on throughout the country. This argument is similar to that of legalizing marijuana. People are going to find a way to do it whether it's legal or not, so maybe the government should make this as safe as possible.

Another similarity that legalizing gambling has to legalizing marijuana is that it can generate billions (yes, actually billions) of dollars in tax revenue every year for a state. In January of this year, legalized mobile sports betting launched in the state of New York. The New York Post reported that in the first month alone, this mobile sports betting generated nearly \$2 billion in wagers, resulting in \$70 million in state tax revenues. This was during just the first

thirty days that mobile sports betting apps were launched in New York, and it is likely that they will generate more than a billion dollars in tax revenue for the state this year. Connecticut, Rhode Island, and New Hampshire also have passed similar laws in recent years, meaning that 4 of the 5 states bordering Massachusetts have legalized sports gambling. No matter where you live in the state, it is likely you can take a short drive to one of these states and place a legal sports bet at a casino or using a mobile app. These apps do track your location, so they will not allow you to bet within a state that does not have legalized mobile sports betting. Since Massachusetts is slightly behind the curve on this matter, they have missed out on billions of dollars in tax revenue that simply have been benefitting neighboring states. Just this summer, legislation was passed in the state to legalize sports betting both in casinos and on mobile apps, and it is projected that early next year is when these apps and sportsbooks will launch in the state.

It is almost as if Massachusetts was pushed to legalize sports betting by neighboring states benefitting off the tax revenue their residents produced. This domino effect of states essentially not wanting to miss out on tax dollars all started in June of 2018 when the Supreme Court declared a 1992 act illegal, according to USA Today. This act was known as PASPA, standing for the Pro and Amateur Sports Protection Act, and it had taken a harder stance making sports betting illegal throughout the country. The Supreme Court's decision in 2018 now left it to states to determine their own laws around sports betting, as they had with other forms of gambling in general in the past. In the 4 years since then, 30 of the 50 states have legalized sports betting, with many more expected to follow suit in coming years (Forbes).

Since then, you may have seen a commercial for one of many mobile gambling apps while watching a sporting event. It is likely that on a pregame show, you will see the lines that the bookies have established for each team, next to the odds they have set for placing a bet, as

well as the over or under. It is almost as if you cannot avoid it no matter how hard you try. It's like the leagues are begging you to bet, giving you this information whether you ask for it or not. Imagine being somebody who had a gambling problem in the past, simply trying to tune in to your local basketball team playing a game on a weekend, now you're tempted to get back into your old habit. Or imagine you're just a kid trying to watch the game with your parents. I'm sure there's been a lot of young people who became educated on gambling against their will on how to place a bet after just asking what that number on the screen means. I wonder if this next generation will be able to watch a sporting event simply for the innocent joy that our generation did when we were younger, or if they will remove all attachment of a local sports team in place of just gambling. I understand the many pros of legalizing gambling and sports betting throughout the United States, and I'll probably continue to participate responsibly in these activities. However, I also feel a level of concern for just how commonplace this has become in our country's society. It's easy to guess that gambling addiction be much more common in the decades that come, and I feel that states and corporations should try and do more to encourage people to stay responsible and avoid developing a habit. Balancing the scales to both sides of this argument are extremely difficult, so it will be fascinating to say the least to see how the legalization of sports betting and gambling affects our society in the years to come.

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