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# OPINION Football and gambling: How we're in the midst of a 'potentially catastrophic' epidemic

'I was gambling up to £20,000 a day,' admits professional footballer Michael Chopra

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By **John Jewell**  
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Michael Chopra and John Hartson are two top-level footballers who have struggled in the past with gambling habits



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A few days ago, Welsh footballing legend John Hartson wrote in the Daily Mail about his gambling addiction.

At the peak of his problems, he stated, he had accounts with six or seven betting companies some of whom would regularly deposit amounts of £40,000 into his bank account so that he could feed his compulsion.

**MORE: [Welsh football icon reveals the depths of the gambling addiction that nearly cost him everything](#)**

Of course Hartson isn't the first sportsman to become addicted to gambling and among athletes football players appear to be particularly vulnerable to the affliction.

The list of former professionals who have lost millions of pounds and ruined their relationships is unfortunately long. Arsenal player turned pundit

Paul Merson, for example, calculates that he lost £7m during his career while recent Cardiff favourite [Michael Chopra has admitted](#): "I have probably lost between £1.5m and £2m. Your first bet's your worst bet. As the years have come along and I've earned more money I've started to gamble more. I was gambling up to £20,000 a day at times."

Thankfully, Hartson hasn't had a bet for six years but [his revelations](#) are a timely reminder that football continues to have a significant problems in this area.

In the last year alone, he writes, he's had calls from six Premier League managers asking him to help players with gambling problems.

And the Premier league is currently in thrall to the betting industry.

As [the Guardian's Paul MacInnes points out](#), 20 years ago not a single team carried the name of a gambling company as sponsorship on their shirt – now nine do.

Look at Swansea City, their sponsors are [Letou](#), the first Asian entertainment service to provide cash based online gaming who took over from last season's provider, BetEast.

This is all to do with global exposure, of course.

Though arguments about quality will never cease, the fact is the Premier league attracts the greatest worldwide audience. It's [carried by 80 broadcasters in 212 different countries](#) and the average game is watched by 12 million people.

Compare this to Spain's La Liga, which attracts a viewership of around two million.

According [to the BBC](#), North Korea and Albania are the only two countries not to have some form of rights agreement in place to show matches.

In the [2014-15 season](#) alone the English Premier League, or EPL as it wishes to be known, was broadcast in 730 million homes, where it reached three billion people.

So there's little mystery in why betting companies are attracted to football and when one considers the [views of Phil Carling](#), managing director of global football at sports marketing agency Octagon, we can see that on a national level, betting on soccer is the lifeblood of the industry.

Recent records show that football was worth a record [£1.4bn to bookmakers](#) last year.

He states that in the last decade gambling on the multitude of options that a football match offers has become the "major source" of sports bets, accounting for more than 70% of all bets placed.

The nature of betting has also changed considerably.

Gone are the dingy old dens populated by chains smoking horse and dog enthusiasts. They've been replaced by airy, hi-tech, brightly lit emporiums with a variety of screens and a hundred different ways of placing a bet.

Also, of course, a punter doesn't even have to go into these shops any more. Technological advancements and smart phone culture means anyone can place a bet at anytime from anywhere.

**MORE: [Gambling, dyslexia, depression - Lee Byrne tells how some of his biggest battles have been off the rugby field](#)**

And advertising is everywhere.

Anyone who watches televised sport will be familiar with actor Ray Winstone's looming, floating head telling us about "in play" bets".



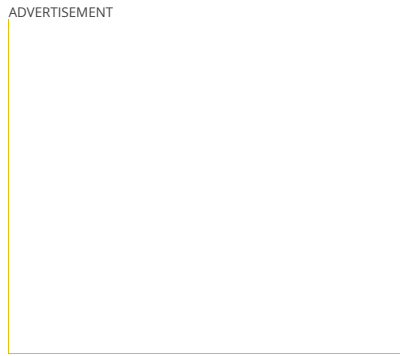
There are the crowded trains and the superstitions, the euphoria of a goal being scored and the agony of one being conceded. At the centre of this is the supporter, holding up his phone (everyone in the ad is male, by the way) which is of course showing the Paddy Power logo.

The betting companies are well aware that football fandom is built on ritual and shared experience. Ideas of community, solidarity, camaraderie are fundamental to the concept as is emotional energy - so the intention is to place betting at the core of fan experience and to normalise its presence in the game.

Which is all well and good but the fact is that the country is in the midst of a gambling epidemic. Earlier this year a report by [the Gambling Commission stated](#) that around [2.3 million people in the UK](#) are either problem gamblers or at risk of addiction.

As Dr Sean Cowlshaw of Bristol University told the Guardian, online betting platforms were having a profound effect on vulnerable groups who now had the ability to gamble 24 hours a day from the comfort of their own homes.

It's staggering to think that between October 2015 and September 2016 the total gross gambling yield of the Great Britain industry was [£13.8bn](#).



This of course means that excessive gambling is a society problem and to be fair to [the FA in June this year](#) it ended all of its sponsorships with betting companies.

Even so, the prevalence of gambling related advertising in Premier League football - whether that's in short sponsorship, at grounds, on television or online - means that the normalisation and progression of a potentially catastrophic pastime is going on apace.

**\* Dr John Jewell is director of undergraduate studies at Cardiff University's School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies.**

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