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Sports betting and the integrity of Australian sport: Athletes' and non-athletes' perceptions of betting-motivated corruption in sport

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of betting-motivated corruption in Australian sport by exploring key stakeholders' perceptions. More specifically, it aims to discover the nature and perceived risks of betting-motivated corruption from the experiences of those within sporting organisations, and the effectiveness of anti-corruption strategies currently in place within Australian sport. Through a qualitative case study approach of three sites (sports) in Australia—rugby league, swimming and water polo—insight into the perspectives of 22 participants, namely athletes and non-athletes (coaches, support staff, administrators and referees) was gained through semi-structured interviews. Using the thematic analysis technique, patterns of themes were identified across the interview transcripts. The findings indicate that athletes and non-athletes view betting-motivated corruption and the involvement of transnational organised crime as non-existent within their sport. There were also mixed perceptions surrounding the effectiveness of current anti-corruption strategies in each sport. The paper provides a platform for future research and highlights the need for improvement in the anti-corruption strategies in place to prevent the threat of betting-motivated corruption on the integrity of Australian sport.

1. Introduction

The advancement of the internet in the mid-1990s has contributed to the exponential growth in sports betting by facilitating the globalisation of the betting market, where national boundaries that once provided governance and a regulated structure no longer limit punters' betting capabilities. An international marketplace now exists and individuals can now bet on any sport, played anywhere in the world, at any time (Reiche, 2013). This growth in the global betting market provides a platform for transnational organised crime (TOC) and betting-motivated corruption in sport (ACC, 2013).

Betting-motivated corruption is a term used to encapsulate three activities linked to the intentional manipulation of results or aspects of a match, or the misuse of insider information with the goal of financial gain through the betting market (Boniface et al., 2012). The three activities include: match-fixing (manipulation of the outcome of a match to support a bet), spot-fixing (staging a certain aspect of a sporting contest to support a bet) and the misuse of insider information (intentional misuse of insider information to gain advantage in the betting market) (Gorse and Chadwick, 2011; Anderson, 2011; Palmer, 2014). Worldwide, betting-motivated corruption has negatively affected many sports, such as soccer (football), tennis, cricket and rugby league (Bricknell, 2015). While this phenomenon has impacted on many competitions internationally there has been a limited but increasing number of allegations

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within Australia (Hume, 2017). Despite the small number of known cases, the Australian Crime Commission (ACC) in 2013 identified betting-motivated corruption and the involvement of TOC in Australian sport as an emerging threat that has significant negative implications for the business of sport.

Sport plays a large part in Australian culture with over 90% of the adult population interested in sport (ASC, 2017). Approximately 14 million adults and young people partake in sport each year with the industry generating over \$39 billion towards the Australian economy (ASC, 2017). With sport being a large part of Australian culture, upholding its integrity is important for its growth and future sustainability. Integrity related issues, such as betting-motivated corruption, experienced internationally is found to negatively impact on sport competitions in contributing to decreasing levels in participation and supporters, loss of sponsors and other funding sources, and in some cases the termination of sport leagues. A contributing factor to the increased risk of betting-motivated corruption is the local and international betting markets. Delfabbro and King (2012) suggest gambling is a part of the Australian culture with up to 80% of Australians participating in gambling at least once in their lifetime. H2 Gambling Capital ranked Australians as the biggest gamblers in the world in 2013 when measured in terms of loss per capita (The Economist, 2014). Sports betting is the fastest growing sector of the gambling industry in Australia, with turnover increasing by 278%, from AU\$880 million in 2000–2001 to AU\$3.3 billion in 2010–2011 (ACC, 2013). Latest statistics suggest that in 2014–2015 the total sports betting turnover in Australia was AU\$7.2 billion (Queensland Treasury, 2016). Despite the increasing level of sports betting in Australia, there have been a low number of reported cases of betting-motivated corruption within Australian sport. However, it is important that more research is conducted to contribute to the already proactive approach taken by Australia to curb the incidence of betting-motivated corruption.

Existing research has focused on the analysis of large public scandals of betting-motivated corruption internationally. Additionally, the existing literature has focused on the role of prevention and regulation strategies in addressing the potential threat of betting-motivated corruption in sport outside of the Australian context, such as within European countries. Given the sparse research surrounding the increasing phenomenon of betting-motivated corruption in Australian sport, this exploratory study focuses on two key issues. In particular, it examines the perceptions of athletes and non-athletes (coaches, support staff, administrators and referees) in three Australian sports regarding: the nature and perceived risks of betting-motivated corruption in their respective sport, and the effectiveness of existing strategies implemented to address the threat.

2. Past research on sports betting and its impact on sport integrity

The literature on sports betting and its impact on sport integrity,¹ particularly betting-motivated corruption, is still emerging and predominately focuses on the European, Asian and international context. Previous research on betting-motivated corruption has examined several aspects of the issue in terms of the risks associated with particular types of sports bets individuals can place, the analysis of key cases reported in the media and the assessment of responses that have been implemented internationally to address the phenomenon.

Research that looks specifically at Australian sport has been limited. Early work came from the ACC in 2013, where they stated that betting-motivated corruption was a real threat to Australian sport due to the globalisation of sports betting (ACC, 2013). This initiated the research by Misra et al. (2013), who examined key cases of betting-motivated corruption and reviewed the responses to address the issue within the Australian context. Most recently, Bricknell (2015) examined media reports on key cases of a range of sports corruption that have occurred in Australia, including doping, betting-motivated corruption and non-betting-motivated corruption (e.g. tanking). Overall, it is apparent that research on betting-motivated corruption is still limited compared to other types of sport corruption (e.g. doping) and requires further investigation, particularly within the Australian context. To understand the full scope of the past research on this issue, this review of the literature discusses the past research surrounding four key areas: the extent of sports betting and betting-motivated corruption, the implications of sports betting on sport integrity, the prevention of betting-motivated corruption, and the difficulties in researching this type of corruption.

2.1. The extent of sports betting and betting-motivated corruption

A focal point of concern in the literature has been around the prevalence of sports betting and betting-motivated corruption in sport. Past research suggests that sports betting is increasingly prevalent and the sponsorship of sporting teams and competitions by bookmakers is normalising gambling (Milner et al., 2013). The nature of placing bets on sport in Australia and internationally has evolved from only being able to place wagers on the winner to the ability to place live (in-play) bets as a match is underway, and exotic bets such as the amount of penalties conceded (Boniface et al., 2012). Pivotal in this evolution in the way individuals can place bets is the development of the internet, which has globalised sports betting. Globalisation, for instance, has increased the capabilities of Australian adults to choose between placing bets via regulated Australian bookmakers or through poorly regulated betting markets online. This capability provides a means to place an illegal bet, which involves a punter placing a bet with an online bookmaker who does not have lawful authorisation to operate in the country the punter is betting from. The International Centre for Sport Security (ICSS) (2014) found that up to 80% of the 8000 bookmakers worldwide are operating within poorly regulated jurisdictions. Within the United States of America (USA), where sports betting is prohibited in most states, Kelly (2011) found that 99% of sport bets (at

¹ Sport integrity is about “preserving the fundamental characteristics of sporting competition as being an honest test of skill and ability, and to act on and off the field in ways that are consistent with preserving the social and economic value of sport” (SportsAccord, 2011).

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