

March Madness and the Office Pool

Who doesn't love watching a Cinderella team defy pollsters and take home the glass slipper? Who wouldn't cheer if their alma mater made it to the Big Dance? But is it hoops mania—or betting mania—that generates the real buzz surrounding the annual NCAA tournament?

The Sweet Sixteen, Elite Eight and Final Four games are the culmination of NCAA March Madness, the biggest annual basketball event in the country. According to the Associated Press, betting on the tournament is second only to the Super Bowl.

Final Four betting action is especially hot in Las Vegas. Professional and casual gamblers alike book reservations in the nation's gambling capital months in advance of the March Madness frenzy, and during the games you'll find Vegas casinos—which earn about \$100 million each spring—packed.

But betting isn't confined to Vegas. The NCAA estimates that one in 10 Americans will complete a bracket for the basketball tournament in which they will risk around \$3 billion annually.

Office pools are a hallowed Final Four betting tradition in business environments everywhere. Co-workers relish putting their knowledge and enjoyment of basketball to the test as the most accurate predictor of the Final Four outcome.

What's So Bad About an Office Pool?

How should a follower of Christ approach the Final Four and what detours should he or she avoid? While a few folks may debate the overall merit of sports, most people embrace the benefits and fun of collegiate competition. Hoping your team will win the Big Dance isn't a sin. It's the "innocent bet" that comes into question inside—and even outside—the church.

Central Michigan University faculty member Tim Otteman, a leading authority on sports-related gambling, has a few thoughts on sports gambling trends, particularly as they relate to March Madness: "While completing a tournament bracket for \$5 or \$10 seems to be a harmless activity, in reality it potentially starts the slippery slope toward gambling addiction.

"No one becomes an alcoholic before they have their first drink, and no one becomes a drug addict before they smoke their first joint," Otteman points out. "Similarly, no one becomes addicted to gambling on sports before they make their first bet—and frequently the first bet is filling out a bracket for the NCAA tournament."

According to Otteman, numerous studies indicate that college students are two to four times more likely to become pathological gamblers than the general adult population. "Combine that with the tremendous amount of information available about the games via the Internet, the 50/50 odds on predicting a winner with the point spread, the popularity of college athletics, the competitive spirit of former interscholastic athletes, and the disposable time a college student enjoys, and you have the perfect recipe for involvement in sports gambling."

Looking to the Word of God

Billy Graham says, "The appeal of gambling is somewhat understandable. There is something alluring about getting something for nothing. And that is where the sin lies. Gambling of any kind amounts to theft by permission. The coin is flipped, the dice are rolled, or the horses run, and somebody rakes in that which belongs to another. The Bible says, 'In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread' (Genesis 3:19). It doesn't say, 'By the flip of a coin you shall eat your bread.'

"I realize that in most petty gambling no harm is intended,"

Graham adds, "but the principle is the same as in big gambling. The difference is only in the amount of money involved."

If greed is behind your gambling, says Graham, be careful because "greed is like a cancer in our souls. It can destroy us. The Bible warns, 'A greedy man brings trouble to his family' (Proverbs 15:27). It also says that greed is a form of idolatry, because a greedy person ends up worshipping money instead of God (see Ephesians 5:5).

The experience of the gambler is similar to that of the alcoholic. He or she experiences the delusion of being master of his or her own life, when in truth, life is out of control. He or she denies having any problem, even while family ties disintegrate. He or she ends up with enormous debts and often steals to cover the gambling losses.

"I don't think I've ever known anyone who was addicted to gambling who didn't think their luck would change and eventually they'd win it all back," says Graham. "But it almost never happens, and the results can be devastating."

So, go ahead and enjoy the tournament! Cheer for your favorite team. But avoid the slippery slope of the office pool.

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