

## THE CONVERSATION

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# Gambling and sport: how bookmakers win in voluntary 'whistle-to-whistle' advert ban

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Half the teams in the English Premier League –like West Ham – are sponsored by gambling companies. Shutterstock

When Huddersfield Town FC unveiled its 2019-20 match shirt emblazoned with an enormous sash bearing the logo of bookmakers Paddy Power, fans were horrified and took to social media to voice their disgust.

But the “new” shirt was actually a hoax, the latest in a series of high-profile marketing stunts from the media-savvy bookmaker, and part of its “Save Our Shirt” campaign that aims to get sponsors to stop ruining football kit with excessive branding. That the fans took the whole caper at face value is a telling sign of how normalised the relationship between gambling marketing and football has become.

In 2005, the Gambling Act made it legal for gambling companies to sponsor football clubs or competitions in the UK, as well as relaxing restrictions on advertising on television and other gambling marketing opportunities. Since then, there has been a dramatic increase in gambling sponsorship in the UK.

In the 2019-20 football season, half of the teams in the English Premier League (EPL) have the logo of a bookmaker displayed on their match shirts. In Scotland, all four professional leagues and both of the domestic



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cup competitions are sponsored by gambling companies, such as the Betfred Cup.

Some clubs even have relationships with several gambling companies. Leicester City, for example, recently announced a partnership with Asian betting brand Yabo Sports, making a total of five gambling sponsors of the club at the one time.



The Huddersfield Town shirt hoax. Paddy Power

There appears no limit to how gambling can be promoted through football. For example, at most grounds, gambling operators provide **matchday betting services**, branded betting kiosks, supporter competitions to win “money-can’t-buy experiences”, and advertising around the stadium on match days.

Like Paddy Power, some gambling companies are becoming more subtle and clever in their promotion. For example, Wayne Rooney’s latest transfer to Derby County was reportedly **partly funded** by online casino 32 Red. Unsurprisingly, he will wear the number 32 on his match shirt.

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## **Policing themselves**

For the most part, gambling companies are responsible for **self-regulating** their sport sponsorship activities. In response to **criticism** about the amount of gambling advertising in sport, the latest self-regulatory initiative is a voluntary “whistle-to-whistle” ban on advertising during live sport, which began this season.

The development was led by the **Remote Gambling Association**, a group that includes leading bookmakers such as Bet365, Ladbrokes and Paddy Power. Under the whistle-to-whistle ban, gambling companies agreed not to show gambling adverts during all live sport broadcast on television before 9pm in the UK, except for horse racing.

The ban is only partial, starting five minutes before the match kicks off and ending five minutes after it finishes. This means that adverts are still permitted during the pre-match build up. The ban also only covers adverts in commercial breaks. But other forms of marketing can appear in the match, including shirt sponsorship and pitchside advertising.

## Responsible Gambling Week 2019



### Limiting gambling ad exposure

In our recent research, we examined gambling marketing in five television football broadcasts in the UK before the voluntary ban came in. This included two live games from the English Premier League and one from the Scottish Premier League (SPL).

We assessed how often references to a gambling company appeared, where these references appeared (such as pitchside advertising), and what they looked like (for example, on match shirts). It repeated our previous work exploring alcohol marketing at the UEFA Euro 2016 football tournament.



Celtic's 2019-20 shirt.

So will the “whistle-to-whistle” ban have any real impact on exposure to gambling marketing during football? In a word, no. In the five football matches analysed, we recorded over 2,000 gambling marketing references. For example, in the EPL match between Bournemouth and Crystal Palace, there were 974 gambling references, appearing around once every 15 seconds. In the SPL's Rangers versus Celtic match, there were 920 references, appearing around once every ten seconds.

Across all five matches, three-quarters of the references were recorded during the match action, so appearing when the audience are likely to be most engaged. We identified a sophisticated array of opportunities to promote gambling companies, with logos on match shirts and pitch-side adverts

appearing most often. Around 1% of references were explicit adverts during commercial breaks, yet these are the only forms of marketing covered by the ban.

It is also worth highlighting that two of the matches analysed in our study featured very few gambling references. These were England versus Italy in an international friendly and Tottenham Hotspur versus Barcelona in the UEFA Champions League. This demonstrates that football, including high-profile matches featuring popular teams, can exist without highly visible gambling sponsorship.

### Where do we go from here?

Some football clubs have recently taken a stance against gambling sponsorship. Luton Town FC's chief executive Gary Sweet has publicly stated that although the club was not taking an anti-gambling position, it did not want "to advertise gambling to children...or be responsible for gambling addictions getting worse".

Other clubs such as English amateur side Headingly FC and Lewes Community Football Club have agreed to wear the Gambling With Lives logo on their shirts to warn about the dangers of gambling addiction.



Rangers' 2019-20 shirt.



Some clubs have decided to take a stand against gambling sponsorship of shirts. Gambling With Lives

But until mandatory restrictions are put in place to reduce the volume of gambling advertising visible during televised football, such laudable actions will pale in comparison. And we should not underestimate the effect of this kind of 360° marketing on the 2m people in the UK who are problem gamblers or at risk of gambling addiction.



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