

# The psychology of spot fixing—why athletes might gamble their careers

September 13 2023, by Lucy Sheppard-Marks

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Fifa is reportedly investigating allegations of an [illegal betting ring in Greece](#). Meanwhile the [Bolivian Football Federation](#) has canceled two top-flight tournaments over reports of [spot fixing](#).

These country-level investigations follow numerous examples of

professional footballers being personally investigated for breaking betting rules. In 2022, [Reading defender Kynan Isaac](#) was handed a 12-year ban for placing illegal bets.

From the outside it might seem strange that well-paid [athletes](#) who seemingly have everything might risk it all in this way. Those who are eventually found guilty can be fined, suspended from playing the sport or even banned for life.

As yet not much is known about the benefits athletes get out of spot fixing, beyond [payments from fixers](#), and researchers aren't even sure if athletes always get payments direct from bookmakers. But it may not all be simply about money.

My previous research into why male professional athletes commit [crime](#) may help us understand why they would gamble their careers—the intense conditions of a professional athlete's world can prime them for criminality.

## **Why do athletes do it?**

Sport corruption cases have been on the [on the increase](#) around the world in recent years.

[My study](#) in sport and crime involved interviewing elite male athletes who have committed crimes, ranging from driving offenses or [drug](#) possession, to importing drugs or grievous bodily harm.

I found the very characteristics that may have made them a good athlete may have also set them on the path to criminality. There are parallels between the [core features of athletic excellence](#) such as competitiveness, aggression, appetite for risk and assertion, and some of the traits that underpin criminal activities.

In some circumstances, an athlete [may view crime](#) as an intense and thrilling activity that fulfills their need for excitement and fuels their appetite for risk.

Some athletes viewed crime as a means to alleviate boredom, with players struggling to fill the void that was left when not competing or training. [The thrill of the crime](#) wasn't necessarily an initial motivator but it was clearly a reason for repeated offenses. As one athlete told me: "Some of those feelings, like feelings of elation and at times camaraderie as well, that I experienced on a football pitch, in a changing room... I got that from crime as well."

Another athlete said, "There is a buzz of it ... Anyone who tells you anything else is lying, it's a buzz."

Athletes in my study highlighted their susceptibility to temptation, their sense of invincibility and belief the rules did not apply to them and, in hindsight, their self-centredness. In psychology, these characteristics are linked with a type of behavior called "[terminal adolescence](#)", where they appear to not grow up because they don't have to. Some athletes are so indulged they develop unrealistic views of themselves and a sense of invincibility commonly seen in adolescents.

A disregard for consequences was also clear. One participant said, "Of course there are consequences, of course there are people that go to jail, I know them, but I'm not going to get caught so I don't have to think about that."

Athletes may take part in crime because [risky experiences](#) can give people a [sense of control](#) in their largely constrained lives—it can help athletes escape from the restrictive nature of elite sport.

Negative sporting experiences influenced some athletes' criminal

behavior too. Rejection, failure and a belief that sporting bodies, coaches or fans are treating them unfairly can incite athletes to rebellion. For example, one professional boxer began a phase of going out with friends and taking drugs after he lost a match because he thought the outcome was unfair.

Substance misuse was also often a [negative influence](#). The need for money to pay for drugs and increasing greed in general were given as reasons for these bouts of self-destructive behavior.

## What can be done?

Sport organizations need to ensure they know the backgrounds, and [social pressures](#), that are inescapable for many athletes so they can protect them. Young athletes' potential criminality is not always on the radar of coaches, but it needs to be. One of the athletes I interviewed did get pulled up by his coach who had realized what he was doing in his free time—and this was a changing point for him.

Participants in my study touched upon the pressure they felt to be successful and how they struggled with mental health. One athlete described how draining his sport could be, and how the intensity—combined with the pressure an athlete is constantly under to perform—was exhausting.

The destructive criminal behavior may be self-inflicted but these athletes still need support. Failing to support an [athlete](#) who has committed a crime may well make things worse, as they struggle with the financial, social and emotional consequences of their actions.

The frequency of drug and alcohol misuse is also an influence on athletes committing crimes. Athletes were indifferent to the use of class B and C drugs, and the [negative impact these drugs could have on their](#)

[careers](#), or how these could result in a criminal record. Education should be extended to coaches about how to spot social drug use, as it was clear that athletes in this study were adept at hiding their substance misuse.

The experiences of athletes who have committed crimes can be used allow others to learn from their mistakes. Telling their stories will also enable those who have offended to give back to their sports, and give convicted athletes a focus for getting their careers in sport back on track.

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