

COLUMNISTS

# *Brown: When betting is everywhere, we gamble with our future*

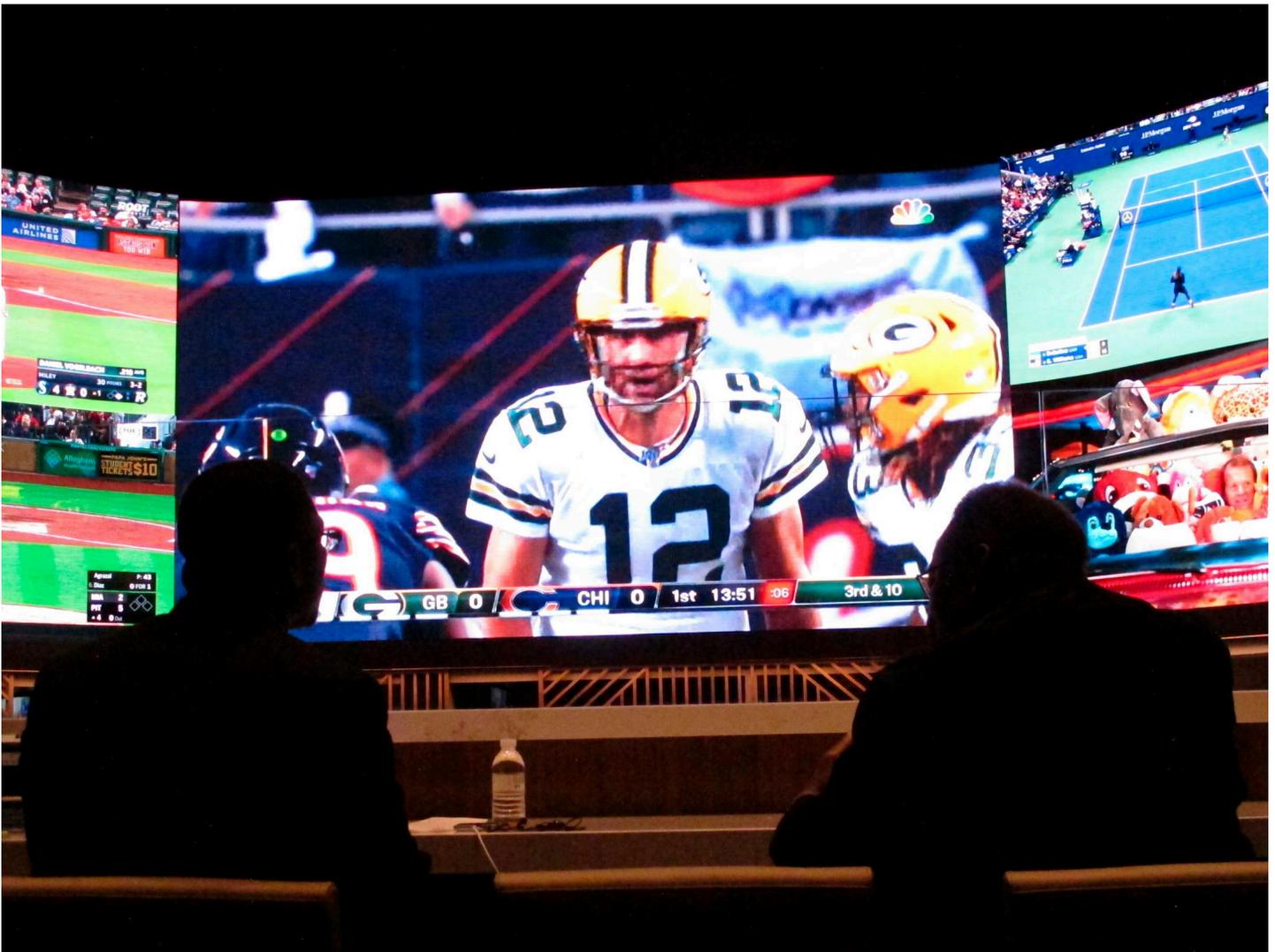
No one stays lucky forever.



**By Aaron Brown**

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A gambler making a sports bet in Atlantic City, N.J., in 2019. (Wayne Parry/The Associated Press)

**Opinion editor's note:** *Strib Voices publishes a mix of commentary online and in print each day. To contribute, click [here](#).*

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None of my three college-aged kids cares much for gambling, but by their senior year of high school they saw gambling pull their friends away. Friendly poker games started to involve serious money. Trips to the casino began at age 18, with online gambling starting much earlier. The prom night theme was “Casino Night,” which also described what many of their peers did afterward in lieu of a traditional kegger.

This trend extends across the U.S., evident to anyone watching this weekend’s Super Bowl. It is expected that \$1.76 billion will be legally wagered on this year’s Super Bowl, according to the American Gaming Association. But that figure will likely pale in comparison to billions more expected to be wagered illegally with unregulated bookies, or by the millions of Americans who will place bets in an office pool or shell out \$5 to \$500 in an unregulated squares contest.

From casinos to sports betting apps, surveys show that a majority of young people gamble, often starting well before adulthood. This trend is leading to problem gambling and financial woes for the next generation, according to local experts.

“I’m really concerned about young people and how they’re going to manage in our economy if they’re coming out of school with not only student debt but gambling debt,” said Susan Sheridan Tucker, executive director of the Minnesota Alliance on Problem Gambling.

But there is also a deeper risk. Like any addiction, this phenomenon represents an emptiness in our society that requires more than mere luck to fill.

Early experiences with gambling can trigger later compulsion. Not everyone is susceptible to gambling addiction, but almost 3% of the adult population will develop some kind of problem, according to a 2025 study from the National Institutes of Health.

As a sports fan, I can’t escape from gambling. Every live game is a billboard for gambling apps. Stadiums advertise gambling on the walls and jumbotron screens. Sports talk shows now spend as much time analyzing the point spreads and over/under as they do the strategies and skills of athletes. ESPN even guides viewers toward its own gambling site shortly after talking about the latest risky parlay that might pay off, if you’re lucky.

As a person who doesn’t gamble, I can ignore all this. But I can’t ignore the social implications of a society built on gambling. The problem isn’t casinos, lotteries or sports

betting. Rather, we're being sold a story that gambling is a way to get ahead in life, that gambling, like cryptocurrency and day trading, is an investment in our future.

There are other reasons that a life built on gambling will let us down eventually. Not all gambling is the same, and a lot of the most popular forms are susceptible to manipulation.

For instance, sports betting is a huge segment of the gambling marketplace; however, results are influenced by thousands of independent actors, which means that as the money builds up, the incentive to cheat grows.

On Jan. 15, federal authorities revealed an alleged points-shaving scheme involving 39 players on 17 college basketball teams. According to indictments from the U.S. Department of Justice, gamblers paid players to underperform, guaranteeing that enormous bets would pay out.

Another huge trend is prediction markets, where you can bet on current events ranging from election results to foreign invasions. We often hear about this as a reliable predictive tool, but there are obvious problems with that. Many people have inside knowledge that would give them huge advantages while betting in those markets.

Early this month, a Polymarket bettor made \$436,000 predicting the ouster of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro hours before the U.S. raid on Maduro's home. We still don't know who did that and likely never will. That money didn't come from a magical forest; it came from other gamblers.

In a Dec. 27 essay entitled "The Prison of Financial Mediocrity" on the social media platform X, an anonymous user argued that our culture's turn toward gambling, futures markets and crypto support a position that he called "long degeneracy." In his argument, young people can't count on the American dream, with its well-paid job and house. So they're chasing the numb pleasure and distant odds of sudden success. His nihilistic conclusion was that the situation is hopeless, and that individuals should try to get in on the moneymaking side of degeneracy. I watched the essay rack up more than 16 million views in a day.

This conclusion is depressing and wrong, but the supporting arguments validate what so many young people feel right now and might explain what we see in our culture today.

There's a difference between legal gambling and ubiquitous gambling. When everything is a potential bet, we commodify our existence. We tell ourselves, and our children, that we will magically come out on top, despite the long odds and the necessity of losers to

make winners. Our well-being will forever depend on luck alone, and no one stays lucky forever.

Instead, we must recalibrate our values. If we're going to gamble, bet on relationships and trust in people. Then, even if we lose, we win. If we stop chasing fast fortunes and quick bursts of dopamine, we might enjoy a more meaningful journey in life.



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