

12.16.24

Chairman Durbin, Ranking Member Graham, and distinguished members of this committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to address the critical issue of sports betting and its impact on players, fans, and society at large. My name is Johnson Bademosi. I'm a Stanford graduate, nine-year NFL veteran, sports fanatic, concerned citizen, and active participant in our democracy. My testimony will focus on four key areas of sports betting: (1) the effects on players, (2) the influence on fan engagement, (3) the broader societal implications, and (4) congressional recommendations.

1. Impact on Players/Effects on Amateur and Professional Athletes

“It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.” – President Theodore Roosevelt

I have always admired the athlete(s) in the arena because of the intense effort, valiance, dedication, and grit it requires to compete at a high caliber, outstrip one's opponent, and achieve excellent feats despite one or many obstacles. The experience of complying with strict NCAA regulations, managing a rigorous academic courseload with athletic commitments, and performing at one peak, in all regards, is a balancing act that all collegiate student-athletes are familiar with. When I was an amateur and collegiate student-athlete, and when I joined the NFL as a professional in 2012, legalized sports betting, as it has come to be, did not exist, but the intense scrutiny and external pressure athletes often receive from fans and critics did. The sophistication of mobile devices, and the rapid growth of media platforms has allowed both fans and critics an opportunity to interact directly with the subjects of their fanhood. The legalization and proliferation of sports betting has increased levels of fan engagement, and has introduced more stress, new mental health challenges and ethical dilemmas, and increased the number of threats and incidents of harassment to both amateur and professional athletes.

Increased Pressure and Mental Health Concerns: The rise of sports betting has heightened public scrutiny of players in ways that have a significant impact on athletes and their families. Players have always had pressure to perform well for professional achievements and to win games, but sports betting has added a new and complex layer to this issue. Now, players are targeted by gamblers who pressure them to perform, not for the benefit of the team, but because the gambler is financially invested in a specific performance element of individual athletes. This has an overall negative effect on a player's physical security and mental state of mind and has the likelihood to distract a player during the time where focus is needed on the field to avoid injury and to perform at the highest levels. To fans, being a professional athlete is glamorous. For athletes, it's a profession requiring all the time and dedication as any other job. Only a select few receive headline grabbing salaries and national

endorsement deals. The truth of the matter is the vast majority of the men and women that make up the labor force are one injury, one game, one bad season away from having their careers cut short. Live, in-game, on demand mobile gambling puts these players in an extremely vulnerable position. When the lights are off, the game is over, and the job is done, players return home to their families like all other citizens return home. We are members of your communities, who patronize the same grocery stores, and our children attend the same schools as yours. For most athletes, there is no gated community, no private security, and yet we, alone, are exposed to the threats associated with problematic gambling.

Social media has enabled athletes to take control of their brands and market themselves in ways not possible for previous generations. However, it has also opened an extremely accessible avenue for threats and harassment directed towards athletes and their families alike. High profile examples of this behavior include harassment and even death threats against a Buffalo Bills player for missing a field goal earlier this year. Last year, a Minnesota Vikings player was harassed about fantasy football teams' performance to the point of deleting his social media. These episodes have a clear negative impact on a player's mental health and overall wellbeing, not to mention threats to player safety.

Simply put, athletes have enough pressure on themselves to perform to the best of their abilities and do not need the added stress of fan harassment to themselves or loved ones – in the stadium or online - or threats of bodily injury because of problematic gambling behavior.

Player safety, on and off the field, is a priority, and safeguards must be put in place so that the athlete(s) in the arena do not have to worry about their safety, or that of their loved ones.

2. Influence on Fan Engagement

Prior to the proliferation of sports betting, tuning in to live games and participating in fantasy leagues were amongst the best ways for fans to support their favorite teams and athletes. No athlete in a high-profile league is short of requests to provide advice or information to support a fan with their fantasy draft. On a rare occasion, players in high-profile leagues participate in a fantasy leagues with each other or alongside fans -- all for the thrill of competition, the joy of watching athletes perform well, and the pride of seeing one's favored team perform well. The legalization and proliferation of sports betting has transformed the entire ecosystem of sports, from how fans consume sports, to how athletes are dehumanized by fans, to the implications and effect of fans interactions with athletes, and to questions of ethics surrounding athletes who are also fans, consumers, and potential investors in the sports betting ecosystem.

Shift in Fan Priorities and Dehumanization of Players: While betting has deepened fan engagement, it has simultaneously transformed the fan experience from enjoying a game, and celebrating or lamenting amongst other fans to some bad actors expressing resentment towards any player(s) perceived to cost a fan money and has also encouraged attempts influence the outcome of a particular wager. This behavior dehumanizes a player, treating them more akin to a betting statistic. Fans who exhibit this kind of behavior should be nowhere near athletes, coaches, or other fans who are there to enjoy the game and cheer on their teams.

3. Broader Societal Implications

The rapid expansion of sports betting has raised significant societal concerns:

Gambling Addiction: The accessibility of online sports betting platforms has contributed to a rise in gambling addiction, including among young people. I am particularly alarmed about this because gambling addiction is a serious disease that has the potential to ruin the lives of not only the bettor, but also the people and family of the addict as well. I strongly believe that those who are suffering from addiction must be given the appropriate resources and support to recover no matter if it is a fan or an athlete. Additionally, resources must be available to help prevent future cases of gambling addiction and be readily accessible to those who think they may have a problem.

Economic Benefits vs. Ethical Costs: While legalized betting generates substantial tax revenue and economic opportunities for the leagues though not necessarily for the players, it risks commodifying hope and devaluing sports as a pursuit of skill and integrity. The question is whether the commercialization of betting undermines the essence of athletic competition. I believe that sports betting can be operated in a way where the integrity of the game is not compromised, but that will take significant efforts both on and off the field to ensure that bettors and athletes are acting in good faith, and athletes are not put in harm's way. Congress has a role to play in passing policies that reinforce the integrity of the game while also protecting athletes.

4. Congressional Recommendations

To address these challenges, the players unions collectively have endeavored to have player protections included in state legislation such as: (1) advocating for prohibitions on negative bets (injuries, penalties, player discipline, etc.); (2) a prohibition on use or purchase of player biometric data for the purposes of gambling; and (3) ensuring full due process rights in sports betting conduct investigations by notifying the player and their respective labor union of a potential violation.

Each of these recommendations is critically important. A prohibition on negative bets would ensure that fans are not betting on negative outcomes and therefore not have an incentive to heckle players/encourage negative outcomes at a game. Prohibiting the use or purchase of player biometric data would protect athletes from fundamental invasions of privacy and would ensure that players are in full control of their personal health information. And finally, ensuring due process rights in conduct investigations adheres to the bedrock legal principle of our judicial system that should be maintained in sports betting investigations.

Taken together, recommendations such as these would go a long way toward ensuring athlete safety, maintaining the integrity of games, and promoting responsible sports betting among fans. Should Congress consider federal sports betting legislation, it is my hope that you adopt these recommendations and others that protect the spirit of the game and the professionals who make the games possible. On behalf of the players' unions, we stand ready to work with you in this endeavor.

In conclusion, while sports betting appears here to stay and can enhance fan engagement, it also poses significant risks and has had an insidious effect on the mental health outcomes of players, fan culture, and the integrity of sports. A balanced approach that prioritizes ethical considerations and player safety and wellbeing is essential.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to testify. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.