

Blazers making wagers

The illegal web of sports gambling

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Where only first names appear, names have been changed to protect the identity of the sources.

With secret bookies, code words, and individual bets in the thousands, the rise of sports gambling around the country has led high school students, including some in Montgomery County, to chase the risky and addicting highs of illicit sports betting.

In 1922, the Professional and Amateur Gambling Sports Pro-

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ZACH

tection Act banned sports betting across 46 states. A 2018 Supreme Court decision made it possible for individual states to legalize it, and since the ruling, Americans have legally wagered \$65 billion on sports.

Maryland voters approved the legalization of sports betting for those 21 and over in 2020. The first legal sports bet in Maryland was placed on Dec. 2020 by Governor

tively across all platforms. The increased availability of sports betting platforms has created a new market for gambling, and this demand has extended to underage high school students.

Zach, a 2021 Blair graduate, alleges that the Blair market for sports betting was extensive during his time at the school. "Probably around 50-60 kids at least, just in my grade, [were betting]."

Some Blair students turned to betting to make watching underperforming D.C. sports teams more enjoyable. "I am a huge D.C. sports fan, and most of the time the teams are not really good," Josh, a Blair junior, says. "So, I thought if I put money on games, it would make [them] more interesting to watch."

For others, the allure of profiting from sports betting is seductive. "Being somebody that has always been into sports, a lot of high school kids are very intrigued [by being] able to make money off of [their] predictions," Zach points out.

Dr. Ken Winters, a senior scientist at the Oregon Research Institute, explains that winning a bet creates chemical reactions in the brain that release endorphins. "The various neurotransmitters that get activated when a person engages in all kinds of pleasurable activities, also get activated when gambling," Winters says. "That includes... the same chemical reaction... [as] when you're taking psychoactive drugs." Throughout his career, Winters has conducted extensive research specializing in the effects of gambling on the brain.

Since sports betting is illegal for people under 21 in Maryland, teen bettors typically rely on joining underground networks of bookies, agents, and websites. The networks are built off of individual "books" that offer opportunities to bet on a plethora of sports.

These books run on an online platform generally built by copying code from other websites. "A bookie backs the whole operation with money, and they will have a certain amount of agents who all have a list of clients," Josh explains.

Additionally, these agents usually have personal connections to the bettor. "People have reached out to me and said 'do you want to join my book?'" Josh adds. These

books are only accessible if bettors are given logins by the agents. Once the connection to the book has been made, an agent will provide the bettor with a login to the bookie's website.

At Blair, students who bet report that underground books have not been hard to come by. "Within Blair, at the time that I was there, there were probably four or five books running through the school," Zach says.

Since bookies have no legal way of enforcing payment, they start by giving credit and placing limits on how much the bettor can gamble at one time. "When a bookie doesn't know you, they set you off with a limit," Blair senior Jeffrey explains. "It's like a credit score: once the bookie trusts you, you can bet bigger numbers... I have \$6,000 credit because my bookie trusts me."

The system of paying off illegal bets is based solely on trust, so collecting money can sometimes prove challenging for agents. "Unlike FanDuel and DraftKings, where it's directly connected to your bank account, [transactions] are all through Venmo, and [bookies] can't force you to pay," Zach says.

Zach recalls missing multiple hundred dollar bets in a week, but instead of paying his bookie back, he ran from him. "I decided I was going to ghost my bookie and just not pay him... I blocked him on Venmo, I blocked him on text, and everything." If a bettor refuses to pay the bookie, the bookie may send threatening messages to their former client. Zach reports receiving one of these messages: "If you miss any further payments, let's just say [redacted] is not a person that you want to meet. Have a good day and remember [redacted] is always watching," the text read.

Zach says that in his situation, the threats never manifested into real consequences. "They'll say that they have people coming to find you. Never in my experience has that actually been the case," he explains.

The ability to place high stakes bets like Zach's is what keeps many

adolescent bettors hooked. For teens, becoming addicted to these high stakes bets is incredibly easy. "There is a stronger response in the adolescent brain to rewarding events," Winters explains. Additionally, he describes that there is "an even greater burst of neurotransmitter dopamine in the developing brain."

Blair senior Marcus describes the need to exponentially increase the risk of the bet to feel the high of winning. "The first time, you thought it was crazy, and you felt the adrenaline rush... if you do it 20 more times, you're going to have to increase the stakes to feel that same pressure," Marcus says.

Winters further explains that many gamblers raise the stakes of their bets to maintain the same level of dopamine response of their future wagers. "If somebody continues to bet at a high level that is getting him or her excited, to continue that excitement... they likely

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JEFFREY

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This dopamine rush of gambling may be what leads teens to wager thousands of dollars on sports. Marcus's alleged betting logs that start on Jan. 19, 2020 show that he has since gambled over \$2,000 on nearly 200 bets in that time.

Zach says that when he started, he was "putting 10-20 bets in every day." He believes he went overboard in the amount he gambled. "In high school, especially towards the beginning of first getting on the book, I definitely think I had some

sort of gambling problem," Zach explains.

Zach's struggle with gambling may point to a larger issue of teen

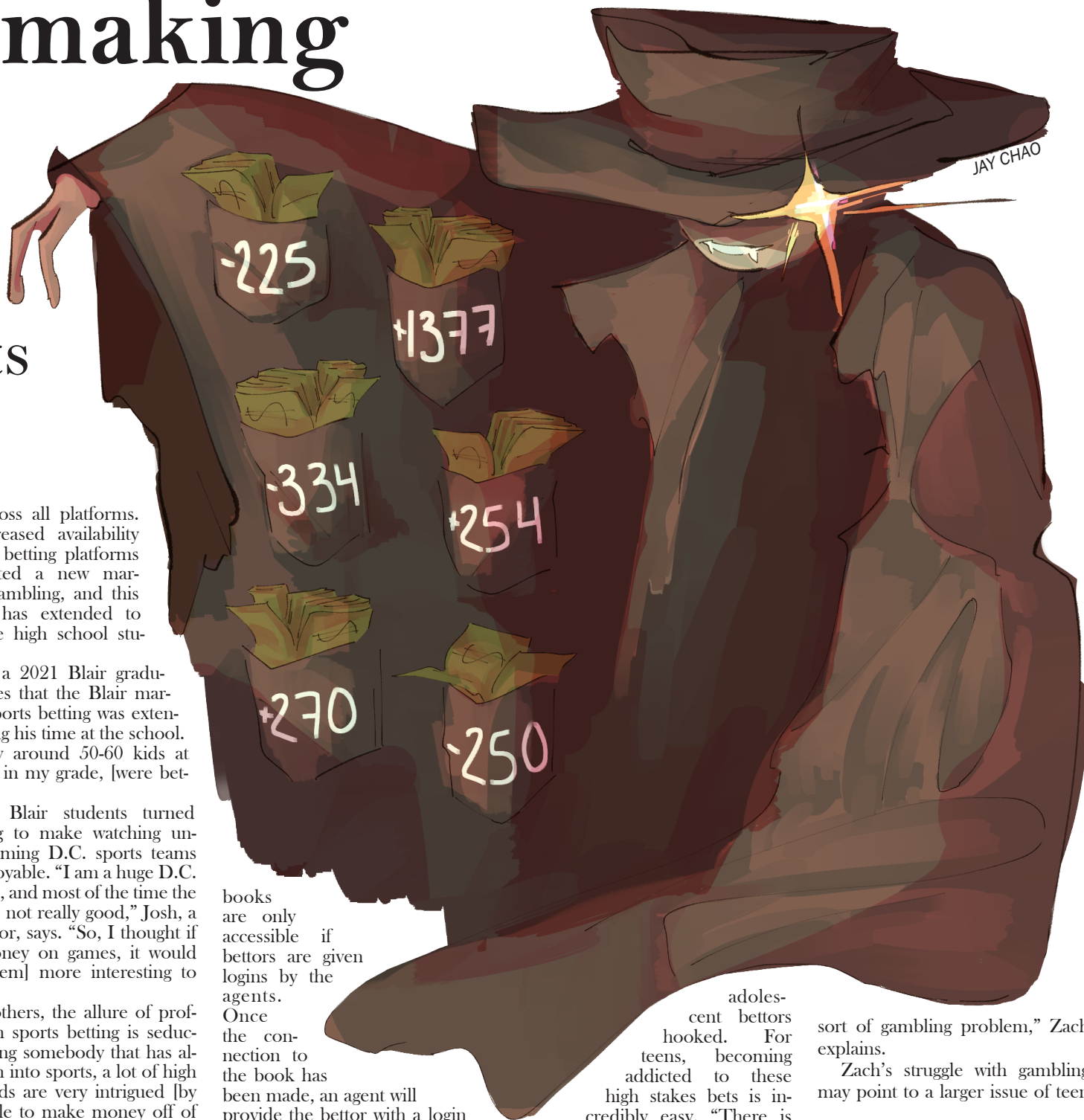
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KEN WINTERS

gambling addiction. Jeffrey, for example, once bet a total of \$5,855 dollars over a six day period. He explains the addiction risks associated with sports gambling. "Gambling addiction is real... people always think about quitting when they're losing big but they hardly ever do," he says. This process of gambling over and over again in an attempt to make profit is called chasing your losses.

Winters describes the process of falling into that trap, which high schoolers are especially vulnerable to. "For a gambler, there's another nasty feature, and that's chasing losses," Winters says. "This would be the negative consequence of being in debt and then thinking, 'Well, if I just keep on gambling a little bit more and even accelerate my behavior, I can get out of debt.' That's likely a devastating decision to make, because it rarely works, and it further spirals the person downward into their addictive behavior."

Zach thinks that another reason sports betting is so addicting is because of how incredibly easy and accessible it is. "You could place a bet in legitimately 30 seconds," he explains. "You could throw \$100 out in half a second if you just type in the number."



JAY CHAO

If you miss any further payments, let's just say [redacted] is not a person that you want to meet. Have a good day and remember [redacted] is always watching.

Larry Hogan. While it is now legal in Maryland, gamblers may only place bets at casinos as mobile sports betting apps are years away from being rolled out in the state.

Although technically illegal in Maryland, apps and websites have made sports betting much more accessible to fans around the world, and some Maryland residents use apps despite the law. The two most popular apps, DraftKings and FanDuel, have more than 8 million and 6 million downloads respec-