



CRAVING THE CARDS

*according to the National Council on Problem Gambling

60-80% OF HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS HAVE GAMBLED IN THE PAST YEAR

*names changed to protect identity

NUMBERS, NOT LETTERS. Those numbers were all senior John Smith* could think about in English class. A \$10 bet. A \$1,000 win. A three-month betting spree. \$6,000 of debt.

Smith's losses have resulted in death threats from bookies — college students that placed his bets illegally — whose numbers he's blocked to avoid paying losses. But that didn't keep the bookies friends from taunting him over text. As a result, Smith works overtime at his \$12-an-hour job and asks his parents for money — saying it's for McDonald's — but still can't pay off his debt.

Smith isn't the only teenager who wagers money. In the past year, 60-80% of high school students reported gambling, according to the National Council on Problem Gambling. In the wake of Kansas legalizing sports betting on Sept. 1, the practice has become more accessible and prevalent among students at East and nearby schools, despite it still being illegal for anyone under 21.

At East, Smith and his friends gamble by faking social security numbers on betting websites that have opened after the legalization. It was senior Arthur Garrett's dad who showed him first the illegal betting websites and then the legal sites that Kansas residents can now use. He has friends whose parents place their bets now, too, he said.

Smith and Garrett have seen most of their friends start betting within the last two years — as past upperclassmen had encouraged them to bet — placing bets through their college-aged bookies. While students have gambled long before legalization, incentives and ads marketing sports betting can encourage more people to gamble, according to licensed professional counselor Whitney Ide, who specializes in addictions in Prairie Village.

Smith didn't expect to crave the feeling of winning \$20 on Chiefs games when he

started gambling. Most of his friends put money on NFL games, too. How could he get addicted? After all, he said, *everyone* does it.

"It started off with almost every single boy just in a fantasy football league, and probably a lot of girls, too," Smith said. "Now the boys, they still do fantasy, but almost every single one of them is just now watching football because they're betting on it. It's huge. It's completely taken over Shawnee Mission East."

Each time he texts his bookie to place a bet, Garrett knows the 50% chance of success. But for him and Smith, the prospect of winning it big and raking in thousands outweighs the odds.

Garrett was skeptical at first. He had rarely heard of his friends winning bets. But two years ago, in the spirit of the Chiefs-versus-49ers Super Bowl, he thought "Why not?" and placed a \$10 bet on the Chiefs. Knee bouncing and fingers drumming with anticipation, he watched the game, sucking in a breath at each interception and puffing his chest at each touchdown. Sunday night football wasn't just about entertainment anymore. He was watching to win.

Then he saw the green checks marking his wins. The Venmo transactions came through. \$100. \$150. \$200. \$250.

He was hooked. "I didn't think it was going to be this addictive in the beginning," Garrett said. "But it totally is. It gives you something else to look forward to with sports."

When teens like Garrett experience winning streaks, they often make riskier bets that increase their odds of losing, according to Ide. In recent years, she's noticed gambling addicts placing frequent wagers instead of sporadic bets.

Many addicts ignore the odds simply for the money, Smith said.

"When you get a [win] on a bet, and then you get a ton of money, it's like, 'Wow, this is why I do it,'" Smith said.

The motivation to gamble is deeper than this "wow" moment, Ide said. Placing a bet releases dopamine and serotonin, the same

chemicals that result from ingesting drugs or alcohol, creating a similar addictive effect on the brain as a physical or chemical substance.

However, despite being highly addictive, sports betting is often considered more socially acceptable than other forms of gambling, according to Smith and Garrett.

Ide attributes this normalization to marketing. Incentives and advertisements promote sports betting as an easy way to profit off of sports knowledge instead of a serious, potentially addictive form of gambling. Companies like Caesars Sportsbook advertise on billboards a "covered \$1,250 bet on any sport as a welcome bonus."

"[Sports betting is] not something that if you do, people are going to look down on your side as taboo," Ide said. "It doesn't have this negative connotation in the news and media around it, which can result in more people doing it and not realizing what can happen."

Sports betting ads can now appear on the Instagram feeds of underage teens in Kansas after the state's legalization.

As a result of the legalization, Garrett, Smith and Ide agree that teens have easier access to betting. While the change allowed Garrett's dad to place his bets legally, it made betting more straightforward for students like Smith, who easily faked his age on websites like BetMGM and Barstool Sportsbook.

Garrett and Smith have seen the effects of prevalence in betting firsthand at school. Whether it's during lunch table conversations or sports practices after school, betting is a popular hobby among their friends.

Sports betting isn't just an East phenomenon. It's also prevalent at schools like Pembroke, Rockhurst and nearby universities. Students at schools near East often use the same bookies and bet on the same playbooks.

Rockhurst senior Thomas Lee* started betting after one of his friends won a bet through an East bookie. Between schools,

he's seen betting methods travel by word of mouth, making sports teams and games to bet on common hallway discussions.

"It all started with friends of friends of friends talking about it," Lee said. "Now, when you walk through the halls, you constantly hear people talking about sports betting, or you're in class, and guys are talking about what they've got money on."

Some students use this popularity between schools to make a profit. After a year of betting with an East bookie, Pembroke senior Jeff Scott* created his own playbook website to rake in extra cash. Collecting 20% of his friends' winnings is worth the risk of having to cover losses people may not pay, he said.

Because sports betting begins before the legal age of 21 within these schools, it can be common for students to continue betting with the same bookie in college. According to Ide, betting at a young age results in an increased likelihood of gambling throughout life. Still, some students believe they'll "grow out of it."

"The older people get, the wiser they will become and maybe realize that it's kind of stupid," said Smith. "But I'm still committed. I've dedicated my life to it."

But at the University of Kansas, East and KU father David Jones* observes students betting as a widespread hobby. While visiting his son at KU, Jones frequently hears former Rockhurst, Pembroke and East students discussing the \$5 they've placed on a Chiefs game or the best player to bet on in an upcoming MLB game.

Whether they rake in thousands or lose even more, those in sports betting — like Smith, Garrett, Lee and Scott — continue actively betting and wagering. The reason many addicts continue betting comes down to the obsession with winning after having good luck once or twice, according to Ide.

"There's still that hope that maybe, next time I'll do it," she said. "When you first get into anything that's addictive, it feels great, and you think it's wonderful. And then you end up going to a negative place, and people continue to do it, no matter what the addiction is."

story by **paige zadoo**

WHAT'S AT STAKE

Since Kansas legalized sport gambling on Sept. 1 for adults over 21, illegal sports betting has increased in prevalence and accessibility among students at East and nearby schools

