Cheating the Spread: Gamblers, Point Shavers, and Game Fixers in College Football and Basketball
By Albert Figone. Published 2012 by University of Illinois Press, Champaign, IL. (216 pages).

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In Cheating the Spread: Gamblers, Point Shavers, and Game Fixers in College Football and Basketball author Albert Figone provided in-depth accounts of some of the most infamous gambling scandals in the world of intercollegiate athletics. Figone succinctly described the format of the book as “an accurate chronology of events that allows the reader to see how athletic corruption and athletes’ susceptibility to playing for a gambler intersected” (p. xiii). A litany of secondary sources were used to highlight gambling-related scandals as far back as the 1920s. Overall, Figone does a commendable job of organizing and analyzing a century’s worth of scandals into a 200-page book.

While useful to any deviance researcher or enthusiast, Cheating the Spread is best consumed by those intimately interested or engaged in intercollegiate athletics gambling research. As Figone alertly stated at the beginning of the book, those actually involved in the scandals are hesitant or unwilling to speak about the events. Thus, readers looking for human-interest stories or drama-filled passages surrounding game fixing should look elsewhere. The book is best utilized as a reference volume or initial reading for researchers searching for background information about gambling within college sports.

The strongest content in the book is contained in chapter eight. In just eight pages, Figone highlighted how the intersection between the increased acceptance of gambling by students, the demographics of big-time college athletes, and the amateur infrastructure on college sports led to a perfect storm for bookies and game fixers. The author used gambling scandals at Tulane University, Arizona State University, and Northwestern University to illustrate the ease in which students and athletes could gamble on college sports and the unfiltered access that both professional and amateur bookies had to student-athletes. Further, Figone noted, “results released by the NCAA in May 2004 illustrated that 35 percent of male and 10 percent of female college athletes had gambled in the past year” (p. 137).

The main limitation of Cheating the Spread is the lack of critical analysis. The underlying reasons and consequences of game fixing often get lost in the heavy historical context provided by the author. When Figone does critically examine the activities it is quite informative.
and well constructed. However, the flow and readability of the book would have been improved by inserting additional commentary throughout the passages. As it sits, readers not deeply invested in the gambling or deviance culture may struggle to find the text inviting enough to read cover to cover. In many places, the reader is left to wonder, “So what?” Outside of embarrassment for the school and individuals, the consequences for this type of activity were often left to the imagination. Further, the inherent reasons gambling and game fixing are attractive behaviors for students and student-athletes needed further exploration.

In conclusion, Cheating the Spread: Gamblers, Point Shavers, and Game Fixers in College Football and Basketball is an excellent read for the right audience. The amount of time and effort that went into gathering secondary information about each of the scandals is extremely impressive and useful for gambling and deviance researchers. I cannot imagine a more comprehensive examination of intercollegiate sport gambling scandals exists. As gambling on sporting contests becomes increasingly socially acceptable, supplementing this reader with a sociological perspective on the underlying drivers for deviant wagering and fixing activity would provide a well-rounded snapshot of the intercollegiate sport gambling landscape.