

High-stakes gambling invades private schools

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Sports gambling

(First of two parts)

FIFTEEN-year-old Robert is every mother's ideal son. He is responsible, obedient, kind, and generally well-behaved --traits that did not escape his classmates who chose him as class president.

About a month ago, though, Robert's mother, Sophia, noticed that he had become unusually quiet and withdrawn. "I thought he had been jilted," recalls Sophia. "And then his elder brother told me that my son had a problem and that I should talk to him."

And what a problem her golden boy had: Robert had run up P90,000 in debt after betting on the results of the US-based National Basketball Association (NBA) games through a bookie. A classmate, who acted as debt collector, was now harassing Robert with persistent phone calls to his home, as well as calls and text messages on his mobile phone. The classmate would later even tell Sophia, who had answered the phone at home, that Robert must pay -- or else.

Robert's parents paid his gambling debts with money from his savings account; his classmate collected the P90,000-check from Sophia's office and cashed it himself.

For Robert and his family, that was the end of that. But sports gambling -- specifically betting on basketball games -- is still going on strong in many private high schools and colleges in Metro Manila, and there are indications that more and more students are being drawn in. And while the bets start as low as P10, school administrators and parents who have been alerted to the practice say some youngsters who are still learning algebra have managed to rack up six-figure debts.

An anti-crime organization also cites the case of a female student of an exclusive college in the Pasig-San Juan-Mandaluyong area who lost almost P20 million after trying to recover previous losses. Unable to pay her debts and repeatedly threatened

by the bookie, her family was forced to transfer residence; the student had to drop out from school.

No one is sure when such serious sports gambling began invading schools in the metropolis. There are indications that it is a fairly recent phenomenon, although that cannot be ascertained because those involved are usually very discreet. Anti-crime activist Teresita Ang See says the schools and parents of the students who have gotten entangled in sports gambling would rather keep silent because of the possible stigma of a scandal, as well as fear of reprisals from those behind the operations.

But it has apparently become so rampant that in one high school, only three students in a class of 40 have yet to place any bets.

Scared

So far, no one seems to have gotten in touch with law enforcers to tackle the problem. But some school administrators have undertaken independent investigations, and one of them has learned that at least five groups of syndicates are handling separate operations in one district in Manila alone.

"They (schools and parents) are very scared to be seen as the ones who blew the whistle because this is like the livelihood of syndicates," says Ang See, who heads the Citizens' Action Against Crime-Movement for the Restoration of Peace and Order (CAAC-MRPO).

In fact, aside from Ang See, only a social worker, a clinical psychiatrist, and Education Secretary Edilberto de Jesus agreed to be identified in this series. The rest, including Robert and his parents, requested anonymity or a complete change of their names.

Ang See says at least two of the students that the CAAC-MRPO talked to had their necks squeezed tight while they were being threatened. A school administrator of an elite high school also says that there has been a story going around about a college student who was allegedly killed for trying to put one over the gambling syndicate. The administrator says although there is no evidence that the story is true, it could only have strengthened the resolve of parents not to report cases of students involved in gambling to authorities.

An official of another school recounts that one student's gambling travails came to the administration's attention only after her bookie's "friends" went to the school and harassed the child by tailing her car. Barely in her teens, the high school student had

bet and lost more than P900,000 and was receiving death threats because her accumulated debts were due. The collector even paid her a visit at home, accompanied by four men who said they were policemen.

Her school decided to do some sleuthing and found out that the bookie was actually also one of its students, who was in turn connected to bookies based in a university in Manila. It also traced the operation to a gambling syndicate based in Binondo. Nonetheless, the school administrator advised the gambler-student's parents not to pay the bookie. The official was asked to lay off the case; the bookie was paid in installments.

School officials, parents, and students interviewed for this article say that there is usually one bookie-cum-debt collector per "active" school. The bookie is a student himself, and may have other students under him who act as his runners or his dummies whenever there is a threat of being found out by school authorities. In some schools, the bookies are the varsity players.

Most of the time, the accumulated bets are wagered or forwarded to another bookie until it reaches the "banker," or the financier. Bookies are often clueless about the identity of the banker since the transactions are done through phone calls.

Bets are placed through the bookie-student's cell phone, which is usually equipped with GPS (global positioning system) that enables the syndicate to trace the whereabouts of its campus bagman with ease.

Betting rules

Students say basketball games are the best to wager on, especially those of the NBA, although bettors also like games in the Philippine Basketball Association (PBA) and the inter-school leagues.

Bets range from P10 to hundreds of thousands, depending on the cap set by the bookie. Students determined to place bets higher than the cap imposed by their school's bookie have been known to approach a "friendlier" bookie in a nearby school.

Bettors are not required to produce the money outright when placing a wager. They pay only when they lose. Winners give up at least 10 percent of their winnings to the bookie as commission. Win-loss transactions are settled weekly on a designated "payday." In some schools, for example, losers pay the bookies on Mondays while winners receive their prize money on Tuesdays.

Bets are accepted once bookies inform bettors through text about the handicapping system to be applied in a particular game. The handicapping system, or the point spreads assigned to specific NBA teams, are supposed to level the betting playing field between the two opposing teams in the contest. The team perceived to have lesser chances of winning is given additional points.

Bookies follow the point spreads assigned by Las Vegas handicappers. This information is usually posted in the Internet.

Betting starts about an hour and a half before each game. For NBA games, that is 7 p.m. to 9 p.m. while for PBA games it is 3 p.m. to 4 p.m. Because the betting takes place after school hours, some school administrators have argued that the problem should no longer be their concern.

'Happy ending'

The most popular bets are "happy ending" -- betting on the ending of the game's final score -- or simply picking the game's winner. But Allen, a student in a prestigious university, says several other types of bets could be placed in one basketball game.

"Sobrang dami ang puwedeng pustahan," says Allen, who has graduated from being a bettor to a bookie. Aside from the final score, he says, one could place bets on quarter and half-time scores. "There's also the total score of each team, or you could combine that with a half-time score," he says. "Then there are the points players make. Let's say Shaquille O'Neill, 24 points. You can bet if he will make over or under 24 points in that game."

Allen bets and collects wagers only on the NBA because he thinks PBA results are sometimes rigged. He is also somewhat of a big-league bookie since the minimum bet he will take is P1,000.

The highest pooled bet that Allen has received for a game is P200,000, including his own wager. A resident of a plush Makati subdivision, he says he does not take the usual 10-percent bookie's cut because "I don't need the money."

"They are all my friends," he adds. "I don't want to make money from them. I am here for the challenge, the entertainment, and the benefits because I always win."

A big basketball fan, Allen religiously analyzes the performance of NBA teams and makes sure that he is updated about its players, particularly reports about injuries, trades, even the months when star players and teams are said to perform well. "You

can predict trends," he says confidently. "You just have to check nba.com every day."

Volatile mix

As a rule, Allen deals only with friends because he wants to transact business with "credible and trustworthy" people. He says he has refused bets because he did not want friends to sink into a quagmire of debt. Although he says he has a P500,000 capital, he imposes a P20,000 limit on each bettor. He accepts wagers higher than P20,000 only when the bettor shows the color of his money.

Allen says he has encountered bettors who had already lost more than P100,000 but were still raring to go. "They're junkies," he says. "So they'd give their car keys or their car's certificate of registration to their bookie and then try to recoup their losses throughout the week or month."

He says he knows people who have lost their cars that way. He also says he knows of students who have ended up selling "everything they own" -- clothes, shoes, appliances that their parents won't notice as missing -- to be able to pay their debts to bookies. He confirms that there are bookies who menace bettors unable to cough up the money quickly enough.

Allen himself began betting on basketball endings when he was a high school senior. But he thinks high school students and sports gambling could be a volatile mix.

"When you're in high school, you're very passionate and aggressive, and you wouldn't be able to resist trying to recoup your losses," he says. "There's little self-control and then you really have no source of income. So I advise them not to bet regularly, maybe just once in a while."

Addicting

But experts say gambling is addicting, and that once one starts betting, it is hard not to keep placing wagers. Says clinical psychiatrist Jay Madellon Carcereny: "If I win, I'd want to bet again. But if I lose, the more I'd want to make another bet because I'd want to regain what I lost."

In the last nine months, Carcereny has handled at least 10 cases of minors -- some as young as 11 years old -- addicted to gambling. She says that all except one of her patients (or more precisely, their parents) paid their gambling debts. Their stories were all the same: They had placed their bets through a classmate who later harassed

them when they were unable to cover their debts.

But the one who eventually could not pay has had the saddest ending so far: According to Carcereny, the student has stopped schooling and is now in hiding. And into drugs.

"It's a case of cross-addiction," says Carcereny. "There's this behavior that you want to let out but you can't. You're looking for excitement, the thrill, but since you can't gamble anymore, drugs are it."

(To be continued)

(The television version of this report will air starting Monday night, June 14, 5:30 p.m. and 10:15 p.m., on The Probe Minute of ABC-5. It will run until Friday, June 18.)