

### A perfect opportunity

- 1 There should be a special punishment for those who cheat at sport. A contest where the fans cannot be confident that everyone on the field is playing to win is a contest that has lost its heart. To deliver anything less than an utterly honest performance betrays an unspoken contract. And yet since sport began, the pursuit of victory has been matched by the temptation to win whatever it takes. The same basic instinct has, for just as long, been met by making a bet on the result. And that has always made for a combustible mix of ingredients.
- 2 30 the report from Rick Parry, the former Liverpool chief executive, on the integrity of sport – commissioned back in 2009 by the Department for Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS) – described betting as a perfect opportunity for those up to no good. All the more so now, in the age of the internet and novel forms of peer-to-peer betting. Yet once again, the Football Association (FA) is failing to meet the challenge. Even after a fortnight of scandals that have crept from non-league to senior league players, the FA general secretary Alex Horne emerged from yesterday's meeting with the DCMS secretary Maria Miller to say cheating was not widespread. It is both astonishing and alarming that he can sound so sure.
- 3 It didn't take the internet and betting exchanges to put crooked sportsmen and crooked bookies in touch with one another, but they have opened up an ocean of possibility that poses real challenges to the regulatory authorities. The thirst for something to make a book on no longer has to work on the relatively distant possibility of being able to influence the outcome of a match (although there have been some spectacular recent cases, usually involving corrupt referees as well as players, where just that has happened). Bets can be made on any number of lesser events, some of which may have little or no influence on the result at all. All that's needed is another punter ready to bet on the same thing. In turn that hugely expands the possibilities for the crooked player. It moves betting, say, on the timing of a yellow card from the random to the fixable. Payouts can be huge. The FA, like the governing bodies of cricket and tennis, has set up a sports integrity unit which, among other things, monitors market movements. In theory it should pick up any significant activity and treat it as a reason to investigate, but although it nailed the Accrington Stanley fix at the end of last season, its critics despair of its lack of energy. The danger is that the 32, the more it appeals to those looking for an opportunity to make money.
- 4 That's why other sport organisations look admiringly at horse racing. The British Horseracing Association is perceived as having rescued the industry from an existential threat after 11 jockeys, owners and other insiders were found to have fixed races. It is now a noisy, high-profile and

highly active guardian of the sport's integrity. It can't claim to have stamped out corruption, but it certainly doesn't tolerate it. It is a very different style of approach to the small, tentative steps taken by other authorities. That makes yesterday's agreement to promote a cross-sport integrity body all the more welcome.

- 5 But it needs the will to tackle the job. Some fear the tight relationship between big gambling organisations and the sports which generate so much of their income will weaken resolve. Television advertising has grown sixfold since 2007. Live betting, where bets are placed while matches are in play, opens another dimension. The Football League is even sponsored by a gambling organisation. In the US, where for most of the 20th century many sports were dogged by corruption, it has been illegal to bet on sport in most states since 1992. It may not be the right answer – it may just drive betting underground – but when gambling on sport damages not just the sports themselves, but some of society's most vulnerable individuals, it must be taken seriously. The FA insists there's little evidence of fixing, but as any judge would tell them, absence of evidence is never evidence of absence.

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