



Sports Betting

# One more night in a 'sober house' for sports bettors

One of the gambling sober houses owned by Right Choice Recovery, an alcohol, drug and gambling addiction treatment center in Dayton, New Jersey. (Toni L. Sandys/The Washington Post)

He hasn't bet in months. It's almost time to move out. Is he ready to have his phone back?

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🕒 24 min 📌 Summary ➦ 📌 📌



By [Kent Babb](#)

*HIGHTSTOWN, N.J.*

He has almost logged another day clean, 167 in a row now, when Adam makes it home after a 12-hour shift at the hospital. Still in his scrubs,

he's greeted by one of his five housemates, lounging on the porch.

"I put dinner in the fridge," Scott says over the nighttime hum of Main Street. "Pork chops."

Adam thanks him with a nod as he climbs the steps of their four-bedroom home, which is tucked between Calvary Assembly of God and CryBaby Tattoo near downtown of this 5,900-resident bedroom community in central New Jersey. The Italianate-style home, with its wide staircase leading to a four-column porch and arched doorway, was built in the 19th century as a monument to local prosperity. It was repurposed in the 21st as an oasis for men in financial ruin.

This is a men's "sober house," one of the first in the nation exclusively for gambling addicts. Adam has been here since it opened in March, after he stepped out of a Gamblers Anonymous meeting and locked himself in a bathroom to bet on an NCAA tournament game.

Every day by 10 p.m., Scott, the house manager and a recovering gambler himself, collects the housemates' phones and locks them in a timed box that won't open until morning. There are TVs but no sports, so on this night in early September, with 22 million viewers watching the first "Monday Night Football" game of the new NFL season, Adam settles into the dining room, where two housemates, Parth and Harsh, are watching Bobby Flay assemble a gochujang-glazed meat loaf on "Beat Bobby Flay."



Harsh shakes his head. They can't watch sports, but there's no rule against debating them. So as Flay checks the oven, the guys argue whether admitted steroid users belong in baseball's Hall of Fame, which is the best college football town in America, whether Aaron Rodgers is too old to play quarterback for the Pittsburgh Steelers.

"Ninety seconds!" a voice on the TV announces.

This kicks off a new subject, one no less primal than the urge to compete. For as long as humans have existed, survival has depended on pursuing rewards. A successful hunt or the discovery of a bush teeming with berries led to the release of dopamine, the "pleasure chemical" that incentivizes *seeking* — and urges us to seek again. These days, with food and water in abundance, the same neurotransmitters may fire upon the receipt of a phone notification, the seductive dance of a slot machine, picking winners on a different form of televised competition. Adam points out that Flay is always the favorite, but Mike likes the look of the Ukrainian-born challenger's Eastern European-inspired mushroom risotto topped with a poached egg.

"I'm starving," Adam says.

"That risotto looks *good*," Mike says.

Scott comes in and collects the phones, and after punching a code into the lockbox, he looks up to see Flay and his challenger plating. *Ten, nine, eight ...*

Saucing. Garnishing. Judges plead with them to finish.

*Five, four ...*

Tense music plays. The video slows.

*Three, two ...*

The men in the dining room say nothing. They just stare at the screen, transfixed by a countdown, waiting for the forbidden rush of a result.



Adam, a client at Right Choice Recovery, talks about his recovery from gambling addiction during his graduation from the program Sept. 11.

At the end of a long table, in a conference room that smells of doughnuts and coffee, in an industrial park office that used to be a Montessori school, Adam waits his turn during morning check-in. He's surrounded by more than a dozen men, each with a similar story.

"I'm Adam C.," he says. "I'm a compulsive gambler, and my last bet was March 25th, '25."

Adam played cards with his family growing up. Then, after being diagnosed as a teen with vitiligo, an autoimmune disease that depletes the skin's pigmentation, the only place he felt safe was inside, away from the sun. He replaced friends from the baseball team with kids who gambled and got his first bookie when he was 13. Three years later, he was going to GA meetings, sponsored by a barrel-chested addict named Rob Sackowitz.

By 2018, they had lost touch. That's the year New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy (D) visited Monmouth Park, the historic horse track near the Jersey Shore, and slid two twenties across a counter. One was a bet on Germany to win the World Cup. The other was on the Devils to win the Stanley Cup. Murphy's wagers, the state's first legal ones, were both futures bets.

He then stepped to the microphone and made a third.

“We’ve got a lot of good times ahead,” he said to a crowd of nearly 1,000, many of them ready to follow Murphy to the betting windows. Gone, the governor suggested, were whispered calls to shadowy bookies; underage gamblers would find it harder to exploit a broken system. Ahead lay jobs, regulation and an estimated \$13 million in new tax revenue.

Adam was there that day. He was four years sober then, but a *legal* sportsbook? It was a dream: sights, sounds, colors, cash. After placing his first bet, Adam didn’t leave Monmouth Park until midnight.

“Every time I relapse,” he says, “that’s where I go.”

In the seven years since New Jersey became one of the first states to embrace the Supreme Court’s overturning of a federal ban on sports gambling, 36 states and the District of Columbia have legalized it. In 2024, the betting industry reported \$13.7 billion in revenue.

Adam again bottomed out, sometimes spending 12 hours a day at Monmouth. He managed to quit betting again in 2020, and by this past spring he was 32, holding down a job at FedEx and four years wager-free.

But the pull of the track was always there, alongside the barrage of gambling ads on TV and online. A University of Bristol study found that sports wagering advertisements appear as often as every 13 seconds across mobile, social and broadcast platforms.

(Video: Jorge Ribas/The Washington Post)

So, last year when March Madness tipped off the pinnacle of the sports-betting calendar, Adam was in his FedEx truck when the urge hit, and he

calmly drove back to the distribution center, parked the truck without telling his boss, then immediately drove his car to Monmouth Park. He left behind a few dozen packages and his latest period of sobriety.

After a few days off the wagon, he confessed to his parents, who told him he was no longer welcome in their house. With homelessness looming, he called Rob, who had founded a rehab center, Right Choice Recovery, in 2020. In late March, Rob was planning to expand his most intensive inpatient programs, for patients who need a place to live and 24/7 intervention, to include a house just for gamblers. Adam, who had sneaked into Right Choice's bathroom to place bets, was among the first to move in.

"This is my last shot," he tells the group at the meeting. Rob, sitting across the table, is nodding.

"You came to our nest," he tells Adam, "because your wings were f---ed up. We fixed your wings."

"I haven't felt this good in a long time," Adam says. "I graduate in two days."

The dozen men at the table applaud. One has gone 19 years since his last bet. Another has made it three days. Each story is as much victory lap as cautionary tale because it takes just one bad day to relapse. Especially on this night, with football season starting, the sports calendar's next apex. The gambling house is already overflowing, Rob says, with a months-long waiting list. So he's planning to open a second house, just steps away from the first. He just needs someone to run it.

Rob points at Adam.

"That's going to be my house manager," he tells the group, pausing to fight back tears.

"The dude is going to have his own bedroom, right?" Rob continues. "It's brand new; that mattress is mint, too, giving you a little extra spring. You got a nice clean drawer; nobody's ever put any s--- in it before, and you know what? That's what six months of hard work gets you."

Adam, the program's ultimate success story, is beaming.

"It's been a long six months," he says.



Right Choice Recovery founder Rob Sackowitz talks to clients at the start of the graduation ceremony.

When Adam moved in March 26, he told himself he would be gone by June. Then July came, then August. Now it's September, and other than a sign-off from a town inspector, Rob's second sober house is ready to open. He installed the same vinyl flooring, outfitted it with the same Ashley furniture, had the walls painted the same calming grays.

"This is our happy place," the new house's welcome mat reads.

They don't all see it that way at first. Adam hated his first days in the sober house, and amid the clash of bad habits and denial, he relapsed twice after being admitted. Another guy handed over his phone as required, then locked himself in his room with a virtual-reality headset to watch an MMA fight. Another refused to check in until the New York Knicks' playoff run ended.

Mike, the new guy, deliberately moved in on opening night of the new NFL season, Dallas Cowboys against his beloved Philadelphia Eagles. "First time in my life," he says, "I didn't think about who I'd pick."

He's 35, with broad shoulders and a bravado polished over years working in tech in Manhattan. He scoffs at the deep-seated issues that must have led his housemates here: childhood trauma, unregulated anxiety and depression, insecurities that present themselves in gambling. Mike's different, he says. On their intake forms, designed to

tailor treatment, clients are asked to rank triggers and vulnerabilities on a scale of 1 to 10. On every question, Mike circled the 1.

“I’m numb,” he says. “Like, nothing affects me.”

That first night, though, after Scott collected Mike’s phone, he couldn’t sleep. The mattress was too soft, he says, with a “s---ty pillow,” and the thermostat was set too high. He tossed and turned until around 2 a.m., when he wandered downstairs and zoned out to “Family Feud.” Scott came down to check on him, and the supposedly numb new guy was almost twitchy, muttering about how he would be unable to work without his phone.

“He didn’t know what to do without his Binky,” Scott says.

New York legalized online sports betting in 2021, and Mike got into a hole fast. He borrowed from his and his wife’s savings, he says, and after that was depleted, he drained their retirement accounts. She left him last year, and Mike lived with an uncle before getting kicked out for stealing. Then he moved in with his mother, stole from her, convinced her that the handyman had cleaned out her safe, then he emptied it again. When friends loaned him money to pay for his divorce, Mike gambled that away, too, he says.

Now he’s here, at least partly because his girlfriend promised him tickets to an NFL game if he did his 30 days. That’s the minimum stay for anyone at the sober house, though if someone’s addiction is bad enough to require they move in here, it’s not usually the minimum they need.

Four days in, Mike insists he doesn’t belong here. He has two kids, a girlfriend, a garden with peppers and tomatoes. He complains about his housemates’ cooking and rewashes the clean dishes. He says the basement is too dark, the desk too rickety, the house rules too draconian. It’s 30 days, he says, and he’s got this.

He claims the urge to gamble is already gone. After a few more weeks? He will be clean and back home and, by Oct. 9, he will be back to normal, in the stands with his girlfriend at MetLife Stadium.

The Eagles play the Giants that night.



Rob talks with a client.

The bedrooms are purposely sterile, with single beds on both sides, and on top of each dresser is a safe. “Is this really necessary?” Adam remembers wondering when he arrived in March. But these are addicts, he says he realized, capable of stealing (or worse) if an urge hits hard enough.

After six months in Room 1, Adam is on his fourth roommate. His name is Rudy.

He’s not funny like Bobby or intense like Jason or weird like Zach, who the housemates describe like a bygone legend. He loved chicken nuggets so much, they say, that he often ate them with his shirt off. Adam found him hilarious.

Rudy, 51, is a former executive in the wine and spirits business, but instead of a designer suit he wears stubble and sweats, the look of a man still coming down from four years chasing action. He used to make seven figures a year and drive a loaded Land Rover, but that’s all gone now, so Rudy recently decided to trade one summer away from his kids for the possibility of 40 more with them. Friends back in Connecticut, including those he still owes money to, raised the \$16,000 per month to get him enrolled at Right Choice.

These are the things you learn about the guy sleeping across from you.

Adam started by sleeping with his back to his initial roommate, Bobby. Eventually, though, he turned to face him.

“To, like, psychologically let him know that I’m open,” Adam says. “You know, just, we can be friends.”

Conversation was easier with Rudy, with diction and body language straight out of a boardroom.

Rudy started gambling when he was 15, calling in bets to his dad’s bookie. He was 40 when he first quit, in 2014, a gift to his newborn son and himself. He never wanted to be what his own dad had been: distracted, resentful, angry, especially when his parlay didn’t hit. Rudy went to Gamblers Anonymous meetings, started his own business, tended to his family.

Then, seven years later, Connecticut legalized sports betting. Rudy downloaded the FanDuel app and deposited \$10,000. It was gone in almost an instant. He replenished it. Gone again. Unlike a bookie, betting apps don’t sleep. Nobody stops taking new bets at kickoff or first pitch, so Rudy could put money on whether New York Yankees slugger Aaron Judge would hit a homer, how many strikeouts Gerrit Cole might rack up, whether a team would hold a lead or blow it.

In-game betting supercharges the action, parlays boom despite the house’s built-in edge, and “microbetting” is now the fastest-growing vertical in gambling. At some sportsbooks, these bets — on a single pitch, the next play, the tiniest hinge of chance — account for nearly 1 in 5 wagers placed during live events. And when one game stopped, Rudy didn’t. He would lie awake and bet on Russian table tennis, Belarusian basketball, South Korean baseball.

Then, last spring, he vanished from his daughter’s first birthday party. The brain, wired for reward and risk, comes alive amid unpredictability and risk. Fueled by dopamine, the same addictive urge that sent early humans onto a barren prairie now pushed a little girl’s father into a locked bathroom to build long-shot parlays.

“Whatever was available,” he says now. “I needed the dopamine hit. *Needed it.*”

By the time Rudy's friends pitched in to get him here, he had lost his job, his business and his marriage. He had blown between \$5 million and \$7 million, he says, roped back time after time by sportsbooks' incentive programs: VIP hosts, he says, free tickets to games and branded gear. Rudy went so far as to sign up for Connecticut's self-exclusion program, which allows gamblers to bar themselves from casinos and mobile sportsbooks, ranging from a single day to life. Rudy checked the longest box.

But the New York state line was 30 minutes away, so he would chug along in his parents' beat-up Jeep Compass, reach the border and bet. "What the f--- am I doing?" he says he asked himself. It didn't stop him. He would have pulled off on his drive to the sober house in July, he says, if only he had money to deposit.

Instead, he pulled into the small lot in the rear of the house, unloaded his things and climbed the stairs. There's nothing cushy inside the house, no pool table or decks of cards. They get a place to live, a gym membership and a recovery journal. Rob provides \$220 per week for residents to buy groceries, and they're encouraged to cook and clean up as a group. If guys get bored, there are tennis rackets in the basement and, in the kitchen, a whiteboard that tracks progress and chores. Next to each man's name is a weekly duty and the date of his last bet.

ADAM — 3/25 — BATH + Porch/Walkways

HARSH — 4/16 — TRASH + Stairs

RUDY — 7/18 — KITCHEN



Right Choice Recovery client Yuri smiles after his graduation ceremony. (Toni L. Sandys/The Washington Post)

In a house this old, it's a given that there are ghosts. They don't rattle chains or haunt the basement but are whispered about by the people they left behind.

When a client graduates from Right Choice, there's a small ceremony in the conference room. Families come and pizza and cake are served. Rob says something about his nest and the birds, and he almost always gets choked up.

They wiped Bobby's name off the whiteboard in June. He had been a core member of the "Fab Five," the first group in the house. Then Jacob and Jason. Then Zach. Finally, in September, it's Adam's turn.

"This kid is a miracle," Rob says. His parents aren't there, so Rob, in twin capacities as big brother and symbol, pauses as the lump in his throat subsided. "Some guys, the group helps. And some guys, a few *special* ones, help the group."

The night before someone moves out, Scott gathers everyone in the living room. *Congratulations*, he tells them, *on making it this far — an accomplishment that really isn't one*. When a guy packs and heads out,

that's when the real work begins. Then his name is erased to make room for a new one.

After that? A coin flip, Scott says.

Jason, back in Boston after leaving in June, still wakes up early and meditates before step work. Zach sat in the passenger seat as his mom drove him back to Florida, created a new account in her name and placed a bet. Bobby at least made it a few days before relapsing.

When their former housemates discuss them, they keep it positive. Bobby and Zach relapsed, but they soon returned to meetings. They're doing better, the housemates say. They will be okay.

Scott is different. He calls himself a realist, a guy who can spot fakers. "I've seen it all before," he says. "Some guys just aren't ready to change their life."

Right Choice Recovery client Yuri talks about struggling with his gambling addiction. (Video: Jorge Ribas/The Washington Post)

With the new sober house still not ready after Adam's graduation, he's keeping his room in this one. In the six months since he unpacked in Room 1, he has learned to find comfort in small victories: a folded T-shirt, sneakers aligned under his bed, the rhythm of a vacuum as it glides across the floor. He still forgets to make his bed some mornings, but when he arrived, somebody had to show him how to plug the damn vacuum in. His mom always did his laundry, and his dad paid his overdraft fees.

"I'm 32 going on like 17," Adam says. "I've always taken the easy way out."

Which is why he's in no hurry to move. The new place is just steps away, part of the same property, but the structure beneath Adam's feet is nonetheless shifting.

Any interruption to the drumbeat of chores and routine is jarring. Already he has stopped journaling, telling himself he will pick it back up after the move. Everything will be a test, he says, when he's over there alone. A new space, with its own smells and sounds, creaking floorboards and the sulfuric earthiness of curing drywall compound, at least a few days with nothing to keep him company but his thoughts. He expects to feel the old pull.

"I've been doing this for the last 18 years," Adam says. "I have 50 or 60 years left in my life. Am I *never* going to gamble again?"



A client's worksheet from a gambling addiction therapy session.

He has six months of recovery, techniques, people he can call. Adam installed software on his phone that prohibits him from using gambling apps, and in New Jersey, he self-excluded from mobile gambling for five years.

Why not lifetime?

That would be cheating, he says. He wants to *earn* his sobriety, to be able to say, in 30 years, that he quit because of emotional and spiritual growth, discipline, willpower.

"I'm more excited than scared, but I *am* scared," he continues. "I want to get out of here."

With Adam slipping on his chores, leaving his bed unmade and keeping clean laundry in the basket more often, Scott has started wondering whether Adam is cut out for being a house manager.

“Are they going to respect Adam when they see how many inches they can take?” Scott says. “Everybody loves Adam, and I want a wonderful life for him. But he lacks any sort of authoritative component. I don’t want to call him a marshmallow, but yeah, he’s a marshmallow.”



Rob is waiting on a license for the new sober house.

Day 195. The first Monday in October. When Adam gets home, still in his scrubs, he’s pissed off.

It has been 19 days since Adam graduated, and the new sober house passed inspection a week ago. But now Rob is waiting on a license for the new place. Adam is tired of waiting.

Rudy is moving out tomorrow, heading back to Connecticut and his kids, while Adam awaits his fifth roommate. He heads into the kitchen, yanks open a pizza box, and the lid clips a soda bottle, knocks it over, the bubbles hiss across the counter. So now he can add “KITCHEN” to this week’s assignment of “TRASH.”

He marches upstairs, slaps a duffel bag onto his unmade bed and starts stuffing clothes inside. Scott walks up.

“What are you doing?” he asks.

“Leaving,” Adam says.

“Going where?”

“A friend’s.”

When someone moves out, scheduled or not, Scott is required to supervise. Just another house rule Adam won’t miss. No rule says he has to talk to Scott, though, so he doesn’t. He packs silently as he tells himself that none of this means he’s going to bet. He will play the tape, lean on his tools, call Rob.

But he does need a drink.

“We lie to ourselves so much,” Mike says later. “We’re the best liars in the world.”

Adam carries his stuff downstairs, through the arched doorway, down the steps. Then he climbs into his car and guns it down Main Street, makes a quick left onto Franklin, then a right into the parking lot of the Mercer County Library. Seven hundred feet from his bed, he spends the next three nights sleeping in his car. Then, when it’s too cold, a motel in Marlboro Township.

On Saturday, he’s driving east when he calls his parents. Can he stop by so they can talk? They say no. Not until he’s back in rehab.

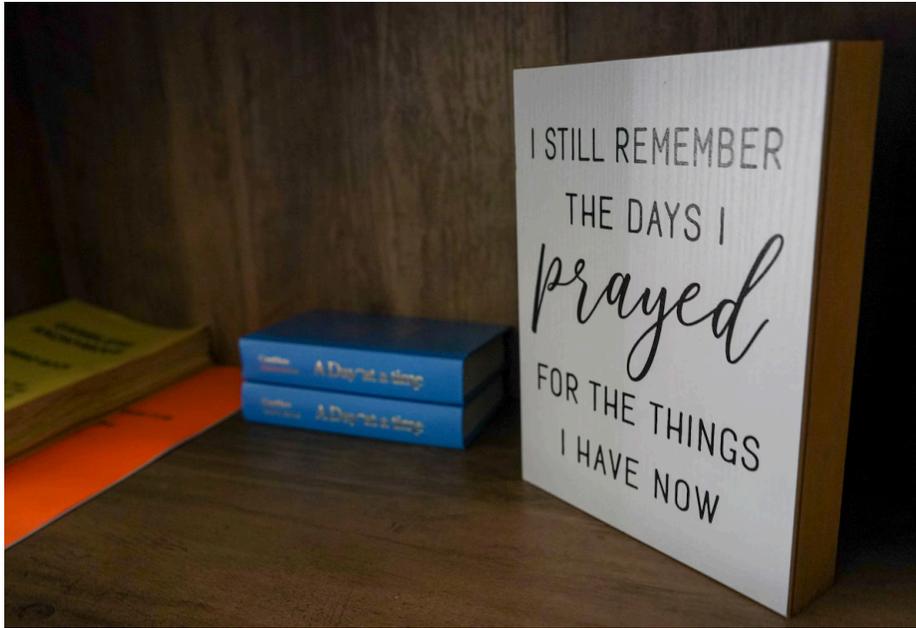
So he keeps driving, past Colts Neck and through Eatontown, finally making a left onto Oceanport Avenue before parking at Monmouth Park and walking into the intoxicating glow of the sportsbook: soft lights, plush chairs, a 75-foot wall of games, screens and possibilities.

A while back, Adam heard that a kid he went to high school with is now coaching at the University of Texas, so that’s how he rationalizes his first bet.

“Pathetic,” he says later. “I just wanted to occupy my day.”

The next day and the one after that are easier. The next day, he’s back, and when he loses so much during the NFL’s early window, he bums cash off a guy in his 80s. Then he marches back to the same bank of

betting counters he first visited in 2018, sliding the borrowed bills across the counter.



Some sober house graduates get quickly sucked back into gambling.

The next morning, he wakes up in the dingy motel but in a familiar place: rock bottom. He has nowhere else to go, so he climbs back into his car and drives. Eventually he makes a right and parks in a lot he knows well.

He swings open the door, walks in, feels the shared desperation. He takes his usual seat and waits for the circuitry in his brain to come alive. Adam scans the faces, many of them he knows.

He will tell his story soon, explaining the suddenness and power he felt two days ago, the pride he feels now that he made it back to the group. For how long, he will say, he doesn't know. Recovery isn't permanent. It's borrowed, checked out like a library book, due back tomorrow and every day after that.

"He's a gambler," Rob says. The nest, he says, has to be stronger.

Later, Adam will fill out new paperwork, a new intake questionnaire, conduct new interviews with clinicians. Then he will drive across town, park behind the old Italianate and head back up the stairs. Room 1 now belongs to two housemates Adam hasn't met yet, and on the whiteboard downstairs, his name added to the bottom: *ADAM - 10/5 - ↓ BATH.*

He will drop his things in Room 3, where Mike once slept, across from where Harsh, not Adam, is now preparing to be house manager of Rob's new place.

He will do all that, but first, this. It's morning check-in, and it's his turn. He sits at the head of the table, with his hands folded, and takes a deep breath.

"I'm Adam C.," he says, "and my last bet was yesterday."



Adam hugs his counselor at graduation.

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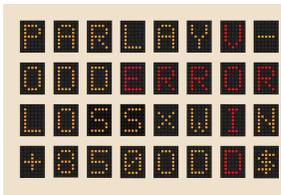
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