

The World Cup has a gambling problem

Overshadowed by the Spain-Argentina final, rampant betting advertisements cast a dark shadow of their own

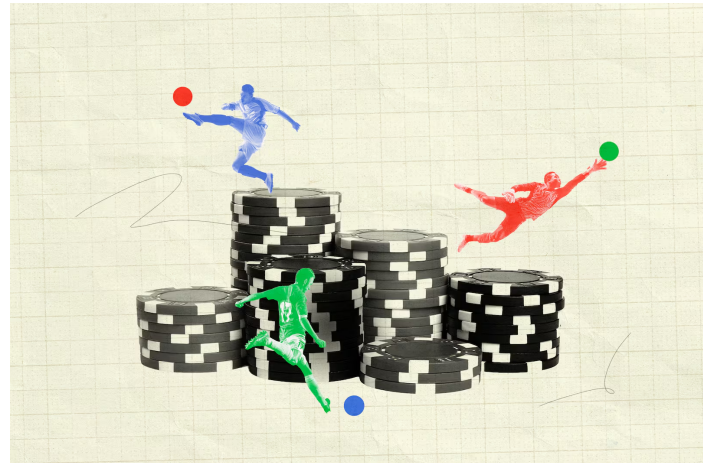
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By Ethan Bauer

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About a week after the World Cup began in June, an obscure New York State office set up tables at a watch party on Long Island with a message that felt downright countercultural: It's OK, the ads argued, not to gamble.



Eliza Anderson, Deseret News PURCHASE IMAGE

Known as the “Take a Pause” campaign, the program’s origins go back to early 2025, when it launched to coincide with Super Bowl LIX and March Madness. It has run continuously since then, but with the World Cup final to be played across the Hudson in New Jersey this Sunday, organizers with the Office of Addiction Services and Supports knew a unique opportunity beckoned.

This year’s World Cup has been the most-wagered-on sporting event in history, with some projections as high as nearly \$600 billion in bets. And if you’ve watched any of the games, you’d probably guess as much, given the proliferation of ticker ads for ADI PredictStreet and Kalshi, FIFA’s official prediction market partners, as well as its sports gambling partner, Betano.

This is new for FIFA, which until this year had never partnered with prediction markets or given gambling outfits anything approaching this level of visibility at the men's World Cup (it did partner with Betano regionally in 2022). "FIFA is committed to continually enhancing the fan experience and embracing innovation that brings supporters closer to the game," FIFA President Gianni Infantino said in the [press release](#) announcing the partnership with ADI PredictStreet. "By partnering with FIFA, ADI Predictstreet will be introducing an exciting new way for fans around the world to engage with football." In other words: With sports gambling and prediction markets (which are functionally the same thing) continuing their [American takeover](#), FIFA couldn't stand to miss out.



France's Dayot Upamecano during the FIFA World Cup 2026, Group I match between France and Senegal at MetLife Stadium on June 16, 2026, in East Rutherford, New Jersey. | Baptiste Fernandez, Associated Press

"It doesn't come as a surprise. They're always looking for new revenue," says Samindra Kunti, a Belgian journalist who has covered FIFA and gambling as long and as thoroughly as anyone. He points to other prominent FIFA partnerships with a crypto outfit and Saudi Arabia's national oil company as examples. Yet something about the betting partnerships, he contends, is uniquely troubling given FIFA's status as the supposed custodian of the game.

"The rightful question to ask is, if you are custodian of the game, surely you are not going to promote gambling on your sport?" Kunti adds. "But as ever, in particular with FIFA, commercialism and money trumps any other meaningful considerations."

Knowing that, the "Take a Pause" campaign tried to meet people where they were. Rather than scold, it used gentler language, encouraging folks to just give gambling a break. The campaign "scored" on Long Island, per a [post](#) on X with, as of this writing, 43 total views. A similar [post](#) on LinkedIn attracted eight likes.

The program isn't insignificant; its World Cup efforts include 1,000 billboards placed in subway stations across New York City since early June, spokesman Evan Frost tells me,

as well as three more ads each on the Long Island Railroad and Metro North platforms. They've also flown QR-coded advertisements from planes and driven around mobile billboards as part of a \$1.25 billion budget allocation for the Office.

But that's the Office's *full* budget — not just the “Take a Pause” campaign's. Kalshi's most recent valuation, meanwhile, was \$22 billion. Polymarket, its largest competitor, stands at \$15 billion. And both of them have spent major money advertising around this World Cup.

On TV, Kalshi turned to Timothée Chalamet as spokesman, while Polymarket leaned on British-Nigerian filmmaker Gabriel Moses to direct its visually striking “Questions Are Everything” campaign. And even during the games themselves, FIFA's official sponsorship with Kalshi-partnered ADI PredictStreet is a regular highlight of the pitchside ad ribbon.

With the World Cup officially embracing gambling, the most-watched sporting event in human history has become a delivery system for an industry that exploits addiction. Sports betting has already saturated much of American fandom for years, but is any institution — civic, athletic or otherwise — willing to say no? Or, better yet, *capable* of saying no?

“Take a Pause” tried its best, but when I asked Kunti about it, he told me he hadn't seen a single one of its ads. Instead, particularly in New York, he's been stunned by the depth of Kalshi's and Polymarket's total, seemingly unopposed proliferation.

“It's a torrent of advertisements everywhere,” Kunti says.

They've been noticeable and inescapable since he touched down, from Newark airport to the subway to Times Square, where he saw former Mexican goalkeeper Guillermo Ochoa and former American soccer legend Clint Dempsey urge onlookers to “Trade the Beautiful Game.”

It's almost too on the nose.

Too suggestive of the question at the heart of gambling's takeover of the World Cup — and everything else: What, exactly, are we trading the Beautiful Game for?

‘This is illegal’

It really wasn't long ago that all of this was impossible. For decades, U.S. law prohibited the proliferation of sports betting outside Las Vegas and a few other carveouts like horse racing and jai alai. But in 2018 — just eight years ago — New Jersey and its Atlantic City casinos successfully sued and overturned the law that had previously governed sports betting, unleashing a new era for American sports fandom.

It started with companies like DraftKings and FanDuel, which quickly pivoted from their fantasy football businesses to offer traditional wagers. Big names in traditional gambling and sports like Caesars, MGM and ESPN soon followed suit. And more recently, prediction markets have emerged as the latest evolution.

Though they function differently from traditional sportsbooks, cosmetically they are almost identical, and their business model is the same: Get as many people to place wagers on outcomes as possible, and take a cut of the action. Prediction markets continue to operate in a legal gray area, with states like Utah vowing to fight them all the way, but they've thoroughly infiltrated the cultural fabric of this nation. However, they remain illegal in many places abroad, which has created challenges around the World Cup.

No event is more watched globally, and global regulators have struggled to adapt. Across the European Union; in Asian nations including Singapore, Indonesia and India; in New Zealand and Australia; and in Brazil and others, temporary or permanent bans on prediction markets have become common and contentious. Even the in-game ads are troubling. But options are limited.

Kunti, for example, reached out to the Netherlands' gambling commission to ask about the ribbon ads clearly visible during games. "Their point of view was absolutely adamant," Kunti says. "This is illegal." So he then reached out to the country's national broadcaster, seeking clarification as to why it was allowing illegal ads to be shown.

It didn't have a choice, the broadcaster explained.

It was just too difficult to fight. "Which I think is a lame answer because they can use a digital overlay," Kunti adds. "But they said it would be too time-consuming and take

away from their core mission.”

There have been some more hopeful moments. Kylian Mbappé, the French forward who is arguably the best player in global soccer right now, has adamantly refused to partner with any gambling companies, calling the practice “destructive,” especially for young people and even people he knows personally. Mbappé also used his considerable influence to oppose his inclusion in officially licensed World Cup ads for a gambling partner of the France Football Federation.

“I think it’s notable to hear people like Mbappé talking about how they’re not taking gambling money,” says Joon Lee, an independent sports journalist who has covered the World Cup extensively and spoken openly about his own refusal to take sponsorship money from gambling sites and prediction markets. It’s notable because it’s rare, which has made Lee stop and pay attention.

But even more, gambling around the World Cup has forced Lee to monitor a much more uncomfortable, undeniable development. “There’s already,” he says, “this kind of vibe in the air.”

‘Perception is reality’

Amid the gambling scandals that have rocked the sports world again and again recently, many are starting to openly suspect ulterior motives in players and referees. That may not seem like a huge problem right now, but if it blossoms, it could undermine the entire enterprise of competitive sports.

“The credibility of these games is ultimately based on people’s perception of it. Perception is reality when it comes to credibility,” Lee says. “And I think that there are people within the industry who are underplaying how much suspicion there actually is in regard to this stuff, regardless of whether or not it’s true. And I think the industry needs to be more concerned about that degrading credibility.”



France's Kylian Mbappé participates in a training session ahead of the team's semifinal soccer match against Spain, Monday, July 13, 2026, in Dallas. | Julio Cortez, Associated Press

Lee became a sports reporter because he believes in the unifying potential of games. Growing up in Boston, nothing brought his community together like the Red Sox. Sports were his “first language,” and gambling pollutes that language, he believes, by shifting it from a language of stories and emotional investment to a language of odds and financial opportunism.

“When you introduce gambling into it, it makes it feel much more transactional, in part because your emotional investment in these games becomes so tied to whatever bet you place versus the investment you might feel in your community or the fan base or the people around you,” he says. “I worry that we’re moving into a world where people don’t think it’s worth caring about something unless they get some sort of financial return from it.”

He personally backs up that idea by refusing gambling money, even though the return could be substantial. “My understanding from people who have taken this money,” he says, “is that the rates are often four to five times what you might be getting from a regular sponsor.”

Gambling companies, in other words, are literally and openly attempting to buy out any and all potential opposition.

The same day I spoke with Lee, he later posted a screenshot of an email to his Instagram story featuring yet another overture from Polymarket. “Personally been a huge fan of your journalism for a while,” the email’s author wrote. Which is either an outright lie, given Lee’s outspoken opposition to taking gambling money — or, if true, perhaps even more revealing of Polymarket’s plans to wear him, and others like him, down.

Lee isn’t even against gambling, exactly. He’s put money on fantasy football leagues. He’s made small bets with friends. And he can see why leagues and properties like the World Cup have so thoroughly embraced it.

“It’s hard to deny the impact (gambling) has on bringing people in, and people feeling like they have some sort of stake in the games because they have some money on it,” he says. But that new kind of investment often comes at the expense of the older, more

familiar kind that drew Lee to sports in the first place. And over time, that has consequences — at the World Cup and beyond.

“I think what it has also done is I think it just continues to make fans feel like they’re being squeezed out of every last dollar that they have,” Lee adds. “The entire industry, and maybe just, like, living in this world right now, it feels like we as citizens have been squeezed out for every single last dollar. And it feels like this is just an extension of that.”

‘More and more’

Arty Smith first noticed something major had changed about two years ago. He’s been a high school math teacher for 33 years, so he’s seen plenty of generational changes through the decades. But this one was different.

It became too apparent to ignore when, one day after class, he dismissed his students for an assembly. “Make sure you get over to the auditorium on time,” he said. Then he overheard two boys chatting as they walked out. “What’s the over/under,” one of them said of the assembly guest, “on how long this dude speaks?”

Fans watch the World Cup semifinal soccer match between England and Argentina in Buenos Aires, Argentina, Wednesday, July 15, 2026. | Gustavo Garello, Associated Press

From that moment forward, Smith started noticing gambling lingo all over his students’ vernacular. “Our kids’ relationships with sports has just changed,” he says. “They used to primarily just be fans. And I know gambling has been around forever, but nowadays kids are constantly talking in terms of odds. Especially for males.”

Smith, however, didn’t despair. Instead, he sensed an opportunity.

His math classes focus on applied math — statistics and data science. He could leverage his expertise and experience, he thought, to reach his students in a way others could not.

“The language of gambling is mathematics,” he adds. “If you don’t understand probability, if you don’t understand odds or mathematical expectation, you are a sitting duck,” he says. “You’re going to be taken advantage of. And that’s what the gambling industry is counting on.”

He often ponders a poll published by Siena College and St. Bonaventure University in 2024 that found 80% of online sports bettors think they can make money in the long run. It would be a laughable finding — exceedingly few, if any, sports bettors make any money in the long run — if it wasn’t so terrifying. So Smith developed a 35-minute talk weaving math and storytelling that, he’s proud to say, drops that number to 11%.

“I think we all agree it’s important we talk to our kids about drugs and alcohol and unsafe sex,” he says. “Gambling needs to be included in there as well. And virtually nobody is doing it.”

If anyone is filling that void, it’s gambling companies themselves. That’s something Smith tries to emphasize: These companies will do anything and everything to get young people on their platforms. They partner with influencers and college fraternities. They give away free money in all their commercials. It reminds Smith of how the tobacco industry used to give free cigarettes to soldiers, as a little patriotic treat.

“But of course,” he adds, “the goal is to get them hooked.”

Toward that end, the World Cup is but one line in the water, albeit one hunting marlin more than bluegill. “It’s an opportunity for them to get people, especially kids, involved with the way that they market it,” Smith says. “‘You think you know soccer? Place a bet on Kalshi!’ They are very much promoting it as a game of skill. Something that, if you’re smart enough, if you’re savvy, if you play soccer, if you watch a lot of soccer, well, you can make money doing this.”

Which, of course, is a lie — but that’s the bait.

And those lures are currently lingering in every layer of the water, sports and beyond.

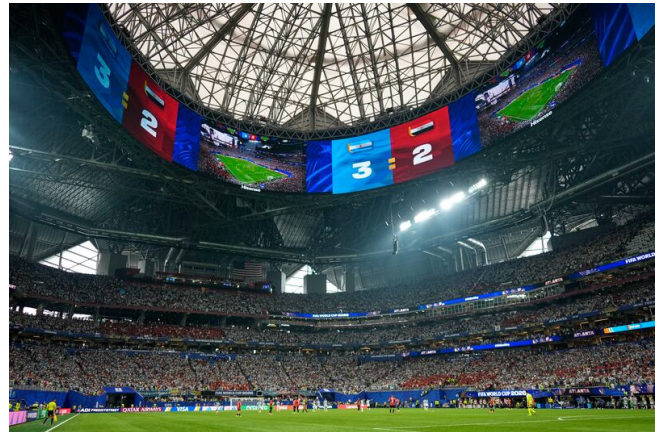
Smith’s 18-year-old daughter reported that Kalshi bombarded her with ads ahead of the much-anticipated conclusion of the reality TV show “Love Island,” encouraging her to

wager on who would win. “They don’t care whether they get teen girls or soccer fans,” Smith says. “They just want more and more people to start doing this.”

‘America’s most-neglected major problem’

Les Bernal sees this as a bigger issue than gambling companies. Governments, from federal regulators looking the other way on prediction markets to states whose budgets rely on gambling taxes, are also to blame.

As director of the advocacy group Stop Predatory Gambling, he’s interested in more than just casual sports betting. Those kinds of bets, as he sees them, are more of a gateway to something much more lucrative. And the World Cup is the biggest gateway of them all.



A general view showing the score after the World Cup round of 16 soccer match between Argentina and Egypt in Atlanta, Tuesday, July 7, 2026. | Mike Stewart, Associated Press

He cites a 2024 report from The Wall Street Journal that found 70% of revenue at one online sportsbook was made possible by just 0.5% of users. “The entire business model is about identifying which of these gamblers are gonna fall into this 0.5%,” Bernal says. And the companies have very effective data harvesting tools to make that possible.

The number one indicator, though, is quite simple: “Do you chase your losses?” In other words, when you lose, do you try to make that money back as quickly as possible? Those customers are the backbone of the gambling economy, and gambling companies will give them every possible perk to keep them chugging along toward bankruptcy. “We refer to online gambling as gambling fentanyl,” Bernal says. “That’s how addictive it is.”

And when it comes to sports, that has a corrosive influence. It changes the nature of the game for anyone who places a wager. “It’s not about the sport. It’s about keeping people in constant action,” Bernal says. “People are just looking for the next bet, and it’s not about enjoying the sport for the drama or the competition.” And even those who don’t wager can’t avoid the fallout.

“Sports today have become all about the gambling. They squeeze the sports around the gambling,” Bernal adds. “And the significance of it is this: These companies are driven by greed. There was no grassroots movement for this type of relentless wagering. This was driven by very powerful financial interests.”

Bernal is proud that his group has attracted support from the political left and right alike, because “there are some shared values in our country despite all the pushes to try to get people to split apart.”

Yet the opposite is also true: Many on the left and right are quite supportive of — even dependent on — gambling. “You want to change the direction of our country?” Bernal asks. “You can’t do it without taking government out of the gambling business.”

Until that happens, he foresees online casinos as the next frontier. Currently legal in only eight states, the industry is lobbying for nationwide legalization. The margins on digital table-style games are incredibly lucrative — much more so than sports wagers.

Both DraftKings and FanDuel already operate online casinos, and they use their substantial sports betting user base to channel people toward these new gambling avenues. In the short term, Bernal, like Smith, worries about what that could mean for young people in particular, who have never known a world free from all these gilded apps.

“You’re talking about an epidemic of gambling addiction among young adults and teens today that’s metastasized,” he says. “And I use that word deliberately, *metastasized*, across our country.”

But even more, he worries what it portends for America’s future.

“The institution of predatory gambling is America’s most neglected major problem,” he says. “Gambling marketing and advertising is what we push on the American people more than anything else. And what we incentivize to the American people shapes our national character. So if you care about the state of our society today, whether it’s our politics or our culture — Las Vegas values have become the cultural touchstone for our country. Like, that’s it.”

And it will be plainly visible Sunday, when Argentina takes the field against Spain across the Hudson from New York City. As in the past, there will be a game to play, and that game will reverberate around the world in a way only the World Cup can. Including, for the first time in a World Cup final, pitchside gambling ads.

When I spoke with Kunti, the Belgian journalist, on Wednesday, he'd just that morning flown to Atlanta from New York's LaGuardia Airport, where he'd noticed a Kalshi ad displayed on an airport monitor. "I was barely awake and there you go," he told me, "you have another advertisement."

He still hadn't seen any ads for "Take a Pause," or any other kind of anti-gambling campaign or intervention. But he remembered the one where Ochoa and Dempsey urged onlookers to "trade the beautiful game" — a marketing slogan that's also an admission: To trade the beautiful game is to trade it away.