

HK\$9b habit of young gamblers worries Club Billions in illegal bets placed on NBA, golf

Philip Glamann

Billions of dollars are being wagered illegally in Hong Kong on American basketball and on golf.

Up to HK\$9 billion a year is being bet with illegal bookmakers on these sports, which are gaining increasing exposure in the city, gaming analysts who have investigated the trend say. Punters are believed to have developed an interest in these sports while living overseas.

The Jockey Club has alerted the government to the problem of illegal gambling on sports it does not offer.

"The best solution is for one operator channelling the sports," club CEO Winfried Engelbrecht-Bresges said. "It will be beneficial to the community but it is up to the government. We should be able to offer all forms of sports betting to prevent illegal gambling." He added: "This was a

A gaming analyst said the trend was predictable. "The younger demographic is beginning to get a bit bored watching horses at Happy Valley trundle around," former solicitor and independent gaming consultant Murray Burton said. "I can understand how the NBA or any other sport would be an attraction, especially for Chinese educated in the US."

The only legal form of sports gambling was horse racing until soccer gambling was legalised in 2003 to try and curb rampant illegal betting on the game. The Legislative Council would have to approve the legalisation of betting on any other sports, and anti-gambling groups would be bound to object strongly.

For now, the club is the only place where Hongkongers can legally gamble. But punters can easily place a bet with underground bookies or with gambling websites overseas. Some, such as Ladbroke.com and bet-fair365.com, even offer services in traditional Chinese characters – used in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Macau.

The sites offer bets not only on basketball and golf, but also baseball, boxing and American football.

Mett Ng, who likes to bet on soccer through the Jockey Club, said some of his friends bet on the NBA.

"It's getting more popular," he said. "I know that many people do this. Many people like the NBA in Hong Kong, but you can only bet on it through the websites. Many youth like to play basketball and some of them are involved in betting."

Other sports, such as baseball or American football, were not as popular. "The NFL, not many people know the rules," he said.

Former Hong Kong police detective David Fernyhough, who heads the local office of corporate-risk investigation firm Hill & Associates, said the rise of gambling on the NBA and to a lesser extent golf was not surprising. The emergence of Chinese stars such as Yao Ming (姚明) and Yi Jianlian in the NBA, and the frequent games on TV had made the sport more popular, and that would spur gambling on games.

Illegal gambling has been a major problem for the Jockey Club for years. Illegal bookies offer better odds and spreads, and extend credit, and the club cannot match these incentives.



Against the grains. Tourists leave nothing to chance as they brave Beijing's Tiananmen Square yesterday amid a sandstorm that blanketed northern China, affecting 270 million people, and

turned the sky orange. The capital's residents were urged to stay indoors and some flights were delayed. The storm, the worst in years, was exacerbated by drought. Photo: Xinhua

Full report Page 6

Pope rebukes Irish bishops for abuse 'errors'

Associated Press and Ambrose Leung in Vatican City

Pope Benedict rebuked Irish bishops yesterday for "grave errors of judgment" in handling child sex abuse by priests and ordered a Vatican investigation into the Irish church to wipe out the scourge.

Addressing Irish Catholics, Benedict said: "You have suffered grievously and I am truly sorry. In [the church's] name, I openly express the shame and remorse that we all feel."

But his letter to the faithful, read across Europe amid a growing, multi-

nation abuse scandal, did not mention any Vatican responsibility. And he doled out no specific punishments to bishops blamed by victims and an Irish investigation for having covered up years of abuse of children.

The Pope's letter – the first papal document to deal with the abuse scandal – directly addressed Ireland but the Vatican said it could be read as applying to other countries. Hundreds of allegations of abuse have come to light across Europe, including in the Pope's native Germany, where he led a diocese in which several victims have come forward.

In Rome, Bishop John Tong Hon, head of the Catholic Church in Hong Kong, which has 246,000 worshippers, said the scandal was a "very unfortunate incident" which would serve as a lesson for other dioceses.

"We have to see it from a Christian angle. Perhaps God wanted us to learn a lesson when something bad happens," he said.

While a cardinal at the Vatican, the future pope told bishops around the world to report all cases of abuse to his office and keep them secret. Irish bishops have said the letter was widely understood to mean they

Pope envoy in new role 2

Child abuse maelstrom 9

shouldn't report the cases to police.

But in his letter, he exhorted abusers to "conceal nothing".

"Openly acknowledge your guilt, submit yourselves to the demands of justice," Benedict wrote, and said they had betrayed the trust of the faithful. He faulted Irish bishops for having failed, "sometimes grievously", to apply church law, which calls for harsh punishments for abusers.

Victims have been demanding

that bishops resign. Some said they were deeply disappointed that the Pope's letter failed to address the role of senior church leaders.

Hong Kong has not been immune to the sex abuse scandal. In 2003, Michael Lau Ka-ye, 42, became the first person to have served as a priest in the city to be convicted of sexually abusing a child under his care, in 1991 and 1992. The church did not take the case to police, who only acted after the victim's third complaint.

Additional reporting by Fox Yi Hu, Reuters

A bigger issue
Illegal betting on basketball and golf is rising, but the amount, in Hong Kong dollars, wagered illegally each year on soccer games is estimated to be

\$60b

general conversation and we didn't think it was appropriate to press the issue, but we think it will become more of an issue going forward."

The club's head of public affairs, June Teng, said it had to combat illegal and offshore bookmakers to keep betting dollars in the community for tax and charitable purposes. Bookmakers were increasingly offering betting on basketball, golf, boxing, tennis and even the Winter Olympics, she said.

People who have assessed the trend estimate Hongkongers are illegally betting HK\$4 billion to HK\$7 billion a year on basketball and HK\$1 billion to HK\$2 billion on golf. They believe those figures will rise. While this pales in comparison to the estimated HK\$60 billion spent on illegal soccer gambling, it is enough to attract the Jockey Club's attention.

Young bloods make pirate radio waves

Christopher DeWolf

Three young people sit in a smoky studio in a Kwun Tong industrial building talking about art, family and music.

Every so often, they take a break and play a song from My Little Airport, an independent band known for its twee sound and ironic lyrics.

After an hour and fifteen minutes – fifteen minutes longer than scheduled – they come out of the studio to make way for the next hosts. All in all, a fairly ordinary night last week at Hong Kong's newest radio station, FM 101, which launched in the autumn and broadcasts both on the Web and the FM dial.

That wasn't the case a week earlier. On March 4, police and officials

from the Office of the Telecommunications Authority (Ofca) forced their way into the studio and seized HK\$20,000 worth of transmitting equipment. FM 101 is a pirate radio station that broadcasts without a licence, which means its hosts and guests run the risk of hefty fines and even jail time. The station's founders say they are deliberately circumventing Hong Kong's broadcast laws in an attempt to force the government to open the airwaves to small, non-profit radio stations.

"All I want is a place to play indie music," said Leung Wing-lai, 28, a musician and one of the station's founders. "It's absurd this is illegal."

In order to obtain a broadcast licence in Hong Kong, a radio station

CONTINUED ON PAGE 3

Inside News

National

From auditing to checkers
An auditor's job at an international accounting firm may pay well, but Shen Xiaomo (沈小溪), 24, chooses to follow his passion and open a board-game bar. He hopes to make a career out of the venture, which now earns him only 2,000 yuan (HK\$2,270) a month. Full report Page 6

Hong Kong

Suspicious property deals
The government will investigate suspicious property deals, Chief Executive Donald Tsang says in response to questions about a Henderson Land luxury project in Mid-Levels. Concerns have been aired that Henderson faked sales of the flats to boost sales. Full report Page 4

International

Filipinos get Hong Kong help
Months after storms and floods killed hundreds in the northern Philippines and left thousands homeless, lives are being rebuilt with help from Hong Kong. Oxfam HK has helped farming and fishing families, vegetable vendors and craftsmen recover. Full report Page 8

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