

The sports bet & the bunny chow

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Opinion

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Legal sports betting is the best sin almost nobody talks about.

"If lawyers have time to do it, they don't talk about it. If the accused people in court do it, they don't talk about it to the lawyers," says my co-writer.*

Even if you don't know anything about sports betting, writer and co-writer included, you'll know something about the betting houses from their abundance of quirky T-shirts and hats handed out for promotional reasons. Betting works almost just like religion and sports. It seems that even *dominees* might very well be doing it, while the congregation check their phones religiously to see whether they've gotten any luck from the latest test scores.

People who look too excited during any televised matches probably have R200 staked on the Manchester United game. [They haven't won the Premier League since 2012](#), but punters are always hoping for the best.

Here's how sports betting has snuck up on worldwide culture, and why it's sometimes difficult to tell whether this is a good thing.

***Magna est vis consuetudinis* (Great is the power of habit)**

Betting has such a large cultural impact, that you'll know its promotional value even if you have never spent a single cent on Lotto (or sports) before reading this sentence. Gaming provider [Betway](#) sponsors football clubs like West Ham United, Levante UD and Deportivo Alavés. Betting houses are also there to sponsor [international esports leagues](#) or put their money behind the [Hollywoodbets Cape Town Street Parade](#). It's not just the Kaapse Klopse anymore.

Once taboo, sports betting has done a great job of sneaking up on us all. Attitudes towards sports betting have made it a more acceptable form of entertainment, [according to formal gambling studies](#). People used to queue for lottery tickets to buy with their chips; now, you can expect to see people line up to buy betting vouchers to load onto their account instead.

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These days, even if you don't want to get in your car, just do it from your phone. It's not Candy Crush that keeps people on their phones; it's sports bets and illicit slots.

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***Sequere pecuniam* (Follow the money)**

Betting is everywhere. From Johannesburg and Pretoria to Cape Town and Durban, you always know exactly where to find the betting shops. They're always in the same part of town as the takeaways, street buskers, bergies, loan sharks and courts. A betting shop is usually in the part of town you can *feel*: right between the core of the beehive and the place where you can get cheap chips.

There's a betting shop around the corner from almost every mid-city courtroom. The Pretoria Magistrate's Court (Francis Baard Street) is just two minutes from Hollywoodbets (Paul Kruger Street). The Durban Magistrate's Court (c/o Somtseu & Stalwart Simelane) doubles the distance: it's four minutes from the court to Hollywoodbets. If you're looking for Tab Gold, just drive seven minutes away from the Durban Magistrate's Court.

"I very much doubt lawyers would frequent betting houses," adds the co-writer. "There are more roleplayers at court than just the lawyers."

Betting shops aren't this close to the arms of the law for the convenience of clerks, lawyers or judges. While some lawyers specialise in betting laws and gambling acts, the majority of legal professionals would never see the inside of a betting house for their enjoyment. Instead, the inside of a betting shop is more likely to see scores of punters who have to defend themselves in court when their loans have gone bad.

Maybe, and maybe not. These days, even if you don't want to get in your car, just do it from your phone. It's not Candy Crush that keeps people on their phones; it's sports bets and illicit slots.

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***Dormiunt leges aliquando, nunquam moriuntur* (The law sometimes sleeps, but never dies)**

Sports bets are legal in South Africa, under the condition(s) that the bet is placed with a licensed South African bookmaker. Companies like Hollywoodbets and Tab are allowed under law, [because they are adequately registered with local authorities](#).

Online gambling (such as poker and slots) doesn't get the same free pass in South Africa just yet. Slot machines from the smartphone, or poker from the PC, are still illegal. Illegal gambling means, even if you win, you don't. It's not as easy to get statistics on the illicit gambling market, but it's like a retired socialite: we know they're living and breathing somewhere, but you almost never see them out in the open.

***Non crimen* (Not a crime)**

The [Hollywood Bunny Bar](#) sells cheap food: burgers, curries, rotis, platters. Vegans are welcome, though we've never tried to walk into one for the food yet. Come for the food, stay for the possibility of winning (or losing) your cash. Strip clubs do the same: have the cheap prego roll, but stay for everything else. We've seen many individuals with gambling addictions, but this isn't a crime.**

It's called "incentive" in the gambling market, and it's designed to keep customers there. It's almost like cake and tea for pensioners on Wednesdays and Thursdays, but gambling adverts tend to be much louder and brighter. It's why casinos are loud, have no clocks and give you free stuff every few spins. Like casinos, pachinko machines or Candy Crush, houses might be aware that some of their customers are there to go on a date, and then to lose a *moerse klomp* money over a *fokken* bunny chow.

Do the betting operators knowingly have tomato sauce on their hands? We asked several unnamed betting operators for simple statistics on the gambling industry: no response so far. We didn't even get to ask any of the more detailed questions about the current industry.

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***Dum spiro spero* (While I breathe, I hope)**

Sports betting doesn't just sell vouchers and returns: the commodity is hope, and the possibility of being blessed by the odds. And who needs hope? The poor do.

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Like cigarettes or alcohol, sports betting is a legal addiction that many people can't afford. They do it anyway, and the [National Gambling Board admits \(and studies\) the potential danger](#). If you can't afford the taxi back after two bunny chows and a few lost bets, you'll be fine as long as you have your ID and proof of residence with you: there's probably a loan shark right around the corner from the betting shop (or you can just find one from your phone).

According to the National Gambling Board, sports betting was the only industry that showed positive growth (21,2%) during the COVID-19 lockdown. A pandemic didn't cause financial growth in the medical sector, [but caused sports betting to skyrocket](#).

We may not have received any decent and direct answers about the size and scope of the current betting industry, but we do have some nice questions:

- Does that mean sports betting is the pastime for everyone, and it doesn't discriminate?
- Does that mean sports betting is intrinsically ZEF or *gevaarlik*?
- Does that just mean the house always wins?

We'll let you work out the odds.

Notes:

*Coyne acknowledges a co-writer who preferred to remain anonymous.

**For gambling addiction help and advice, contact the SA Responsible Gambling Foundation at 080 000 6008, or visit responsiblegambling.org.za.